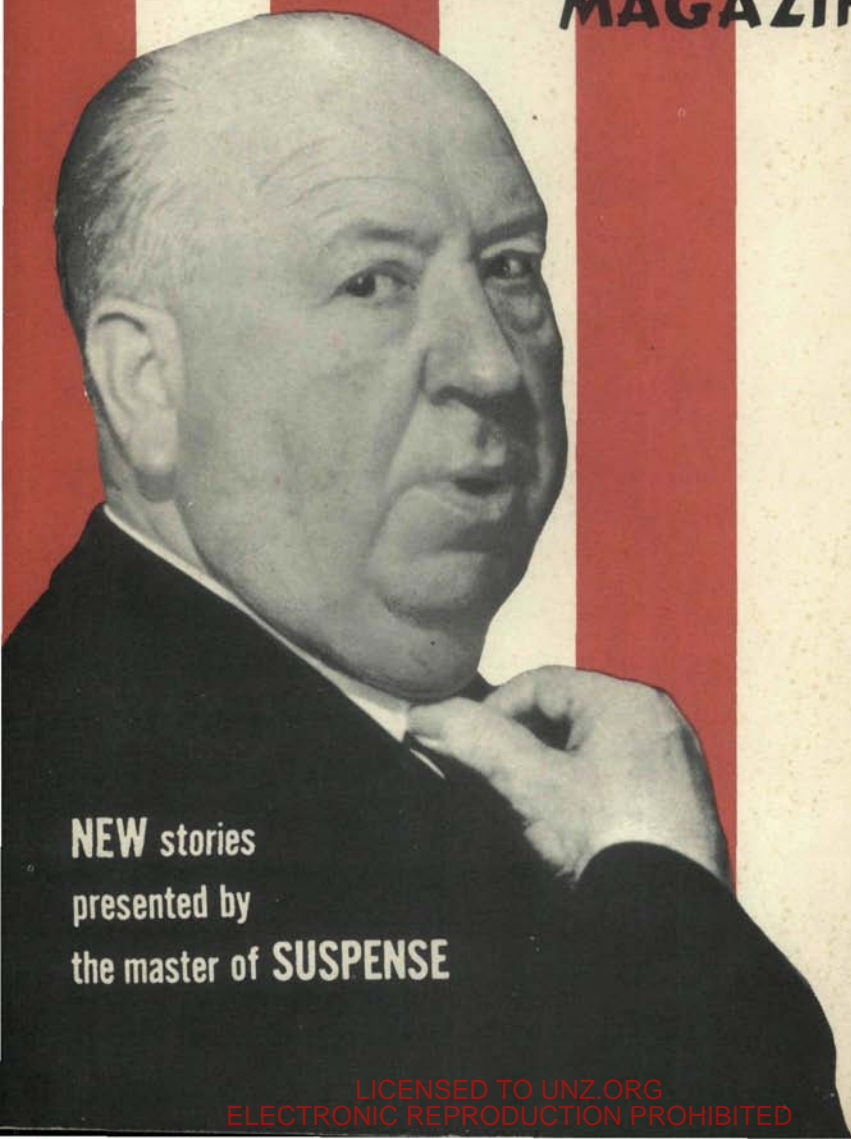


ALFRED

JULY 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY
MAGAZINE



NEW stories
presented by
the master of **SUSPENSE**

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July 1968



Dear Reader:

As Independence Day draws near, we are reminded that freedom inspires daring deeds. History is replete with such accounts, and so is this magazine, though herein there often develops certain changes in that inspirational condition.

Soon now—actually, at the flip of a page—another convention of some of the most highly qualified writers of suspense in the land will be called to order, each of them striving to win the nomination. The politicking is varied and admirable, and there promises to be more than a few surprises. A bludgeon here, a shot there—live coverage becomes difficult.

However, as your reporter on the scene, I switch you with confidence from one spectacle to the next. No matter that so much else occurring this year is fraught with uncertainty. I, for one, feel quite comfortable that every issue of this magazine will prove to be, as those that have gone before, a rousing assemblage of the macabre. You are entitled to register as a continuing delegate on Page 160 or the inside back cover.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

- SHADOW AGAINST SHADOW *by Edward Y. Breese* 142

SHORT STORIES

- FAT JOW AND THE DEMON *by Robert Alan Blair* 2
- A FLOWER IN HER HAIR *by Pauline C. Smith* 18
- YOU CAN BET ON RUBY MARTINSON *by Henry Slesar* 26
- SECOND TALENT *by James Holding* 38
- THE CREATOR OF SPUD MORAN *by John Lutz* 48
- NOBODY TO PLAY WITH *by Irwin Porges* 60
- THE PHILANDERER *by Lawrence E. Orin* 70
- NIGHT STORM *by Max Van Derveer* 75
- GOOD-BYE NOW *by Gil Brewer* 86
- YOU CAN'T FIGHT CITY HALL, PETE *by Bill Pronzini* 94
- WHAT DIFFERENCE NOW? *by Clayton Matthews* 106
- A NICE WHOLESOME GIRL *by Robert Colby* 117
- STEP NO. VII *by Harold Rolseth* 131

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Cartographic pedants notwithstanding, boundless boundaries are still extant.



His late evening visitor perched upon the edge of the sofa, balanced his hat upon his knee, licked his dry lips. "As you know," he began uncertainly, knowing his welcome to be less than warm, "I am often busy outside my shop, reuniting refugees from mainland China with their families."

"I have heard it called ransom by extortion from apprehensive rela-

tives," sniffed Fat Jow disdainfully. He disapproved this slight restless shadow of a man, an importer whose shop offering oriental merchandise was long a Grant Avenue landmark, because it was known that he dealt in other than inanimate goods. The time-honored practice of American "fathers" importing implausible numbers of their "children" had as-

By Robert Alan Blair

sumed unsavory new dimensions since the change of regimes in China.

"As a merchant of some experience," said the importer without offense, "I deliver fair value received. This is a practical exchange . . . the People's Republic needs funds, and many Chinese-Americans have relatives in China." He set his hat beside him and leaned back. "My assignments continue to increase, until I am stealing attention from my shop. I have been in business too long to see it fail."

"This I can understand," said Fat Jow drily, "but why need it trouble me?"

"They suggest that I share my assignments. You know many people, are liked personally and respected professionally."

Fat Jow sat forward in his worn leather rocker. "What princely reward do they think would induce me to participate?"

The importer spread his hands. "The commissions are generous."

Fat Jow peered beyond him, to their images reflected endlessly down the long illusory corridor in the mirrored wall, remnant of finer days when his apartment had been the grand ballroom of the Baxter mansion. "It is money smelling of anguish and fear, to glut the treasury of the adversary." Small China-town merchants are determined

conservatives. "And those who cannot afford to pay the price demanded . . . what of their loved ones?"

"No better, no worse. They remain in China."

"How can a person like you do this to your people?"

The importer sighed. "The world of today distorts values. Without changing direction, I find myself and old colleagues on opposite sides of a political barrier: Did they one day become not-friends, because they began living under a Red flag? A favor asked, am I to refuse? Impatience for social reform creates unusual alliances. I can be useful to them, in a way that does not unseat my conscience. Perhaps the good surpasses the bad; people are made happier by what I do."

Holding temper in check, Fat Jow stood up. "Did you honestly expect me to accept this rationale and join you?"

"No . . ." said the importer sadly. "I brought stronger argument." From an inner pocket he took an envelope, handed Fat Jow a photograph. "Someone you recognize? His name is Hsiang Yuen."

Fat Jow switched on the crystal chandelier, filling the room with jewels. He saw a small boy, straight as a stolidier and serious of mien, standing near a playground. "I

may have seen him," he admitted.

A second photograph. "And this woman?" A sturdy, handsome girl, not over thirty, was pictured arm-in-arm with a Red Army captain.

"It seems a familiar face, but whereas the child's picture could be anywhere in the world, this one could be only in China."

A third. "And this?"

Fat Jow sank back weakly into the rocker: an older woman, hair straight and severe in the old style. "I have a copy of this," he said, not looking up.

"I am not surprised. It is an old picture, one which she might have enclosed in letters."

Fat Jow asked quietly, "Is she gone?"

"She did not survive the upheaval by many years."

Fat Jow closed his eyes. He acknowledged a certain responsibility for his elder sister's remaining in China to her death.

Their father was not a young man when he came alone to San Francisco, leaving wife and infant daughter in Canton. He labored on the Embarcadero, saved his money, bought a hand laundry, and sent for his wife. The child she left with her mother, for the money was not enough, and a woman-child was not regarded highly. They were to send for her

later, when they'd saved enough.

In three-room quarters behind the laundry they lived, both working long hours, not prospering, but slowly setting money aside for the girl's passage. Then they diverted it to immediate needs when the mother became pregnant.

Fat Jow was a year old when his father died. Hope of bringing the girl vanished, for the mother barely kept the boy and herself alive. As soon as permitted by law, she apprenticed him to Moon Kai, the herbalist. Through her frequent correspondence with her daughter in China, Fat Jow developed a warm personal relationship with this sister he had never seen. In rambling childish letters they dreamed of her joining them in San Francisco.

Once he had started earning money, he made optimistic adolescent promises to send for his sister, but she was then almost twenty, and long before he had the money, she married, and her future was fixed irrevocably in China. Less and less did they speak of their shared dream, but their correspondence continued until the revolution triumphed, after which her letters dwindled to sporadic hasty notes. For more than ten years he'd had no word from her.

"This young woman, this child," said Fat Jow, "her daughter and



her grandson, where are they?"

"The boy's parents are now dead," said the importer. "Your niece died only recently of illness; her husband was killed last year, fighting anti-Mao forces in Canton.

You are now Hsiang Yuen's nearest surviving relative. If he remains in China, he will of course be reared in the Spartan tradition of the Red Guard . . . such was the wish of his father."

Fat Jow looked fondly at the sober little face in the picture. "And, knowing that I cannot permit that to happen, you offer me the child?"

"In exchange, they do not ask money of you . . . only your cooperation."

"And if I preferred to give money?"

The importer smiled. "Not from you. You have but one way to bring the boy."

"Refusal would be most difficult," whispered Fat Jow. "What must I do? Surely my acceptance alone will not bring him?"

"When you have completed an unspecified number of assignments to their satisfaction, their local courier will order him flown to Vancouver."

"What is my guarantee that they will not extend my assignments indefinitely?"

"What is their guarantee that you will not report this conversation to the police?"

Fat Jow slumped low in the rocker, passed a hand across his eyes. "I should then jeopardize the boy's every opportunity of coming."

"Exactly. The agreement must rest in part upon faith, yours and theirs."

Fat Jow placed the pictures upon the end-table and pushed wearily to his feet. "I must have time to

think," he said, crossing aimlessly toward the front window. "Will they wait?"

"They are accustomed to waiting . . . years, decades, if necessary." The importer rose and went to the door. "But the boy, can he wait? He is now four, and beginning to assess the world about him. Which world is it to be? This must be the urgency behind your decision. Tomorrow their courier will bring me new assignments; one of them may be yours. Please call me."

Fat Jow stood unmoving in the window as the importer let himself out, watched him walk away into the night.

A child, to brighten his late years? Fat Jow enjoyed the company of children and they his, but he had never been a father. Once, in his days of apprenticeship, Moon Kai imported from China a well-born bride for his young clerk. She was an exquisite little creature whom Fat Jow adored, but within a year after marriage, like a flower transplanted into unfavorable soil, she withered and died.

He lacked courage to subject another to the same risk, and Moon Kai, having invested heavily, did not care to repeat. Fat Jow was content to bask in the tender memory of the bride who was forever a

bride; he had this much, and nothing could take it from him.

A child whose existence he had not known before, but who now meant everything to him, descended from his beloved sister, his revered mother—the child must come. This he resolved without qualification. His only doubt touched upon his civic responsibility.

He found in a trunk the treasured letters from his sister, works of art in their meticulous calligraphy, a skill which would be taught her grandson in the Chinese-language school that follows classes in public school.

A phrase: "Now that I know I shall never see you, I pray that my little girl may somehow realize this dream that you and I have discussed so long. In a small way, it will be I, coming to you through her."

Through her . . . through her son.

Fat Jow slept little that night, and awoke early, leaving the house in the gray mists of morning and walking across Nob Hill, accompanied by the mournful sob of foghorns.

He did not at once raise the "closed" shade upon the shop door, but climbed the narrow stairs at the rear to the loft and the great roll-top desk that was his office. He sat in the creaky swivel chair, looked

down through the rail at the orderly shelves stocked with small bottles, and foil boxes. Hsiang Yuen might learn the herbalist's trade from him . . . but only if the boy wished. Fat Jow would not presume to choose his career. Perhaps he would send the boy to college, enabling him to make his way in the competitive world of the occidentals.

He turned, rested a hand upon the telephone. To this indulgent planning was attached a painful price.

He picked up the phone, dialed slowly, held the final digit against the stop before allowing it to complete the connection . . . released it.

Detective-Lieutenant Cogswell came on after a slight delay. "This is a switch," he said, "you calling me. What do I know that you don't?"

Fat Jow asked, "Does your department attend to the traffic in mainland Chinese?"

"That's mostly the Feds' job, but we try, off and on. It's a little like Chinatown gambling: we never have it entirely under control, and we never know where it's going to pop up next. Why? Do you have a lead for us?"

"I was merely curious."

"Your people just won't cooperate," complained Cogswell. "They

clam up whenever we mention the subject."

"That is small cause for wonder. They dare say nothing which might hinder the migration of people whose most sinister motive is a life of tranquility and hope."

"Illegal migration," growled Cogswell, "that comes under the official heading of smuggling of aliens."

"Yes . . ." Fat Jow frowned, wished he had not called the police.

Cogswell went on brusquely, "All other considerations aside, we have to cut off the flow of funds to Red China."

"Of course," murmured Fat Jow.

"We could use your help. If you could manage to finger their contact man for us, the man who hands out assignments and arranges delivery—"

"I must refuse," interrupted Fat Jow. "I was seeking information only." He hung up before Cogswell could present persuasive reasons for his assisting the authorities.

If they were to apprehend the courier, Hsiang Yuen would never see America. It was at this instant that Fat Jow knew he would accept the importer's terms.

Once more he took up the phone.

With some trepidation he approached the family of his first assignment, and encountered the fear

and hostility foreseen; but then he said, "They ask of you only money; but I too have someone in China, and this is my price. You will pay, and have done, but I must pay . . . how often, how long?"

Word went round Chinatown of Fat Jow's dilemma, and where the importer had met scorn, Fat Jow met sympathy, which made his transactions easier to negotiate. The importer grew more sour with every meeting.

As was his custom on pleasant Saturdays, instead of reopening his shop after lunch, Fat Jow strolled along the nostalgic pagoda-facade of Grant Avenue, mingling with the weekend tide of foreigners (non-Chinese) from the harried world outside. Aromas of sandalwood and incense floated from open shop doors, and shrill recorded Chinese music gently pervaded the midday like the soporific song of late-summer insects.

At Pine Street he turned down the hill to St. Mary's Square, that small hidden park which is also the roof of an underground parking garage. Neighborhood children played beneath the benevolent eyes of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen sculptured in stainless steel, memorial to a Chinese republic of another era.

Now the children came flocking around Fat Jow, black-haired and bright-eyed, clamoring for a story

from Uncle Jow. His mother had brought from China many old tales, most of which he remembered, and he passed the legacy to this generation.

He selected a bench at one side of the landscaped promenade, while his listeners settled into an anticipatory circle at his feet. The circle tightened as he began the story of the little magician, actually a peaceable sort, forced to rule the city by the power of an evil demon that possessed him. The tension of eagerness mounted, for this was their special delight among stories.

Fat Jow, acting the part of a wise man, learned by subterfuge the secret name of the demon, and at night placed the children of the city strategically around the house of the magician. At his whistled signal, the dread name rang out through St. Mary's Square seven times, scattering a cloud of pigeons and drawing the attention of passersby.

Looking over the heads of his audience, Fat Jow saw watching him from the path a statuesque Eurasian woman of rare beauty, with long glossy-black hair and split-skirt silken gown. She smiled slightly, nodded.

After the seventh name shattered the air, the children fell silent, and Fat Jow concluded: "Everywhere within sound of that

great shout, even to the hills around the city, the spell of the demon was forever broken. The children had saved the city."

From experience, they knew that Uncle Jow told no more than one story per sitting, and they ran chattering back to their play.

"A charming story," said the woman, sitting beside him. "You are a man of unexpected talents, and complex. At times you have me puzzled."

"Do you know me?" he asked.

"I might be your evil demon, and the importer your little magician." She took from her handbag a tiny battery-powered tape recorder, switched it on, and he heard his own voice: "... migration of people whose most sinister motive is a life of tranquility and hope." She turned it off; Fat Jow had not moved. She said, "Calling the police was neither wise for you, nor reassuring for me. Still, you told them nothing, and you refused their request for help. Why?"

"I will cooperate with the police," he said reluctantly, "only when the situation warrants."

She put the recorder away. "I am impressed by your performance to date. The confidence you enjoy among the people of Chinatown is an asset. If you are to be trusted—and I am not sure of that yet—you can become of much greater



value to us now than the import-
er."

Fat Jow eyed her critically. "It is as I had thought: another assignment, and another, each more involved and more responsible than the last. And the boy is the bait that you dangle, ever out of my reach."

She smoothed her skirt. "Is Vancouver so out of reach?" she asked.

He caught his breath. "He has left China? But I have hardly begun."

"Monday I am flying to Vancouver."

"To fetch Hsiang Yuen?"

She shrugged. "Possibly."

Fat Jow stiffened himself against premature hope. "As soon as Monday—whether or not I accept further assignments?"

Her manner was not unkind. "Do you really have a choice?"

Slowly he shook his head. "I must do whatever you say. You control his destiny . . . absolutely."

She touched his arm. "It is not espionage or sabotage we ask of you, but a quiet fund-raising program. Why resist? I have studied you, and must question your stubborn adherence to a society caught up in a fever of acquisition and fun."

"You have learned little from

your study, or you would know that I cannot hurt people. I cannot be motivated by hate."

"Hatred of ideas, not of persons."

"But your hatred is personal," he insisted, "else you could not toy so callously with the hearts of people who can do you no harm."

"Love thy neighbor is out-dated," she mocked.

"Not love, but understanding, is the antithesis of hate. Love, like hate, is an unreasoning emotion, and potentially as perilous. One may love while he hates; but he cannot hate someone whom he understands."

"Do you pretend to understand me?" she asked, amused.

"I see an intelligent, dedicated woman who professes what she believes, and is to be respected for it. If you have abandoned self-doubt and are supremely confident of your course, I congratulate you."

"You are a strange man," she said thoughtfully.

"No. I try only to be honest."

She stood up. "You will come to the restaurant of the exterior staircase, Monday night after ten, and ask for Dunya. The boy will be there."

He could not believe. "Once I have him, will you trust me to take more assignments?"

"You will wish to insure the

child's security. Children vanish every day from the streets of large cities."

Fat Jow felt trapped. "I understand," he said.

"I am not disappointed." She moved away with long easy strides, and was gone along the narrow way toward California Street.

The woman had opened to him a glimpse of a chill, no-nonsense world which was after all not so distant. Where one touched it, he came away with clammy fingers. No magicians nor evil demons there. Here the sun shone and children laughed, but to Fat Jow the day had become muffled gray.

"Who's your good-looking lady friend?"

He looked around; Detective-Lieutenant Cogswell stood between him and the shrubbery. Fat Jow promptly withdrew inside his shell. "I do not know her name, and I have not seen her before."

Cogswell sauntered over and sat down, stretching his long legs before him. He pulled out a notebook, flipped a few pages. "Let me fill you in. Name, Dunya Skarin. Born Shanghai. White Russian father, Chinese mother. She and father evacuated Shanghai 1949, ahead of advancing Reds. She has remained in touch with her mother, who has held various powerful political posts in the Red govern-

ment. Lives in Chinatown, makes frequent trips Canada and Mexico." He dropped the notebook into his pocket. "That's enough for a start. The Feds have her under surveillance, and naturally, when she turns up in the park, chatting with someone I've touted as my valuable Chinatown informant, I'm interested. Especially since my valuable Chinatown informant has recently inquired about alien smuggling. Are you mixed up in this?"

Fat Jow turned haunted eyes to him. "Is there sufficient evidence to arrest her?"

"Next time she tries to leave the country, the Feds are ready to nab her at the airport."

Fat Jow moaned. "Unless you can delay them until she returns, let your conscience hereafter be burdened with the responsibility for sending my grand-nephew back to China."

Cogswell gave a low whistle. "I see! Say . . . I'm sorry. It's a personal angle, isn't it? They got to you, too. I don't know if I can hold them off, but I'll sure try. Once she gets out of the country, she doesn't have to come back."

"And are not the results the same? Whether she is out of the country or in their custody, the smuggling is curtailed."

"It's a point. When is she going, do you know?"

Fat Jow drew a deep breath. "Monday," he said in a very low voice. "I am to get the boy Monday night."

Cogswell leaned toward him confidentially. "Tell you what—I'll see if I can't get them to pick her up at the airport, after she brings the boy in. Then we can look into legalizing his entry. If you're his only family, there ought to be a way to cut through the red tape." He hesitated, frowned. "You *are* his family, aren't you?"

"His only family," nodded Fat Jow humbly. "If you can do this, I shall be grateful."

Cogswell patted him on the knee. "Don't worry about a thing. I feel like a heel, even beginning to suspect you were in with them. I should have known better."

"There are hidden sides to every man. Your training drives you to seek them."

Fat Jow sat motionless upon the bench long after Cogswell had gone, eyes closed and hands clasped across his belly, but he was not asleep.

Wisps of fog sailing over the hill on a damp westerly wind drove the people from the park, and then Fat Jow was alone. When he, too, departed, he took the same path as the woman. At California he trudged up the steep grade with short steps, paused for breath at

Grant before he went on his way.

Assuming that he was watched, he wandered along Grant, pausing before an occasional restaurant to read the menu posted outside. Undecided, he looked up and down the street. He crossed, climbed the exterior staircase to the second-story restaurant, asked for a window table where he could be seen by an observer in the street.

He lingered leisurely over his meal, while the restaurant filled with dinner trade, mostly foreigners. There was also an inner stairway and entrance; through the glass door he saw stairs leading to the upper floors, where presumably Dunya Skarin had an apartment.

As he paid the woman at the cash register by the outer door, he said in Cantonese, "I must see Dunya."

The cashier's eyes flicked across the room toward the other door. She said rapidly in Cantonese, "Top floor, first right," and followed in English, "Rest rooms down the hall at the rear, sir. Thank you."

After a reasonable wait in the men's room, he sauntered along the hall and out the inner door. A white-jacketed waiter confronted him, and even before she spoke, Fat Jow recognized Dunya, pale without makeup under a wide-

brimmed hat pulled low. "Your imagination will tell you," she said tensely, "why I hide my right hand in my pocket, and why you will now precede me down these stairs to the street."



The implied weapon did not intimidate Fat Jow; one dies, and the manner and time are seldom of his own choosing. But he obeyed without comment, for he would talk in a place less public.

"Turn right," she ordered, "walk at a normal pace to the next corner, and right again. Remember, I am not far behind. Do not turn around, nor give any indication that you know me."

"These precautions are unnecessary," said Fat Jow.

"Do not talk here!" she warned. "Move on."

They passed unnoticed amid the normally confused pedestrian traffic on Grant: a placid old man, and a waiter going home from work.

Two blocks above Grant, she ushered him into a small imported car parked at a meter, and drove swiftly west across Nob Hill. Continually she watched the rear-vision mirror for evidence of pursuit, and her profile beside him was stony.

"I am quite sure I was not followed," said Fat Jow. "They are more interested in you than me."

"You were seen with the police lieutenant in the park. Is it coincidence that you came afterward to the restaurant?"

"It was not at the direction of the police that I came. They would not have approved. I came to offer counsel, but the hate-trained mind, which must also be a fearful mind, sees only treachery. An understanding mind would weigh my alternative reasons, I believe."

She swung north into Van Ness, turned to look at him. The white mask of her face seemed softer in the fog-dulled afternoon light. "Tell me," she said.

In detail, omitting nothing, he related his conversation with Cogswell. "Then, after I had begged him to delay the federal authorities until Monday, I would not rest. Once I had scrutinized the problem thoroughly, I came to recommend your immediate departure, with no thought of return. Observation would suggest that you have reached a similar conclusion."

Now upon the elevated approach to the Golden Gate bridge, they were moving faster. The fog thickened as they neared the straits. Dunya did not speak until they had passed the tollgate. She sat back, no longer hunched over the wheel. "You know that if I do not return, there will be no Hsiang Yuen. And this is what you recommend to me?"

He bowed his head. "Yes," he said heavily. "My desire to see the boy blinded me to everything else. No more . . . I must be content that your departure signals suspension of your program here."

"Another courier will come," she said almost apologetically.

"If he comes, he comes. But not tomorrow, nor even the next day."

At the center of the span, apex of a broad shallow arch, they emerged into brilliant late-afternoon sunshine glaring upon the vast cotton-layer of fog, and the sky was clear to the horizon.

Dunya took off the confining hat, shook out her hair. "You sacrifice your ever seeing the boy, for this small victory?"

"My joy in him would ever be clouded by this living reminder that I had repaid you for his delivery by leading you into a trap. Now . . ." he drew a deep breath, looked off to the west ". . . he will return to China. It is as well. That is the life he knows."

Once more the gray of the fog enveloped them.

At the north end of the bridge, instead of remaining on the express highway, Dunya veered right into Sausalito, steep hillside village crowded close against the Bay by the looming dark flanks of the Coast Range. Past the village center, she left the flow of traffic and parked. Deep in thought, she turned off the ignition, stared ahead through the windshield. Drawing the words out with much difficulty, she said, "I lied to you. Hsiang Yuen is still in China."

"I see," said Fat Jow without expression. "But the end is the same. The bait would have dangled long."

"I knew they were watching me, and I was uneasy because you were friendly with the police. I gave you the wrong date, to gain a little time while I slipped away, tonight. Then you appeared at the restaurant, and I hastily revised my plan. You could not remain behind, to report that I had gone. It is a long way to Canada, and public transportation would be unwise."

"Revenge is not my way. I am but grateful that the coercion demanding division of my loyalties has ended. I would say nothing."

"I know that now. Therefore I may return to my original plan, and proceed alone." She twisted in the seat and pointed back toward the village center. "There by the old ferry slip, you can catch a bus back to the city."

He asked with surprise, "I may go?"

She gave him a small ironic smile as she started the engine. "Unless you choose to come with me. I still think you are on the wrong side. You have almost convinced me that there can be decent people in the capitalist camp."

Not yet ready to believe, he climbed out uneasily, bent to look in at her. "You too display unexpected talents," he said.

She reached across the seat and pulled the door closed. "Is it impos-

sible for me to learn honesty? I have been exposed to a master."

She pulled away from the curb, and sped north without looking back.

The charade was over; the unreality of recent events came emphatically over him. There was no such person as Dunya Skarin. And Hsiang Yuen . . . ?

With dragging steps, he walked back toward the bus stop. A purpose had gone from his life.

On Monday, which was to have been the awaited day, Fat Jow resumed the even tempo of his well-ordered existence. It could not truly be said that he forgot the episode, but he put it behind him as best he could.

Shortly before noon, Detective-Lieutenant Cogswell came into the herb shop, found the herbalist busy with the account books at the desk in the loft. He said pointedly as he climbed the stairs, "The Feds tell me our girl seems to have skipped town."

Fat Jow did not look up from his work. "So I have heard."

"Yeah?" Cogswell sat on the cane-bottomed kitchen chair beside the desk. "Where?"

"I made inquiry at the restaurant Saturday," returned Fat Jow promptly.

"Just what were you doing there?"

"A certain physiological function peculiar to restaurants . . . eating."

"Smart guy," drawled Cogswell. "You wouldn't have had anything to do with her leaving early, would you?"

Fat Jow turned upon him an injured look. "Lieutenant," he said patiently, "could it ever be in this lonely heart to deliberately prevent my grand-nephew from coming? For this is what her early departure means."

Cogswell squirmed uncomfortably. "Well, I thought I'd ask."

"This is, a grievous blow to me. Can your practical western mind comprehend that?"

"What kind of a stick do you think I am? I'm sorry . . . I wasn't thinking. Did you see the woman again?"

Fat Jow looked past him reminiscently. "These ancient eyes delighted in the beauty of the silk-clad Eurasian woman only in St. Mary's Square. I must confess, in naming today, she outwitted me."

"For you, that's quite a confession."

"Obviously, she wished me to pass the same word to the authorities." Fat Jow returned to the account books. "Now she is gone . . . and I know that Hsiang Yuen's destiny does not lie in America. I bow to fate."

Cogswell honored his dejection, and went away quietly.

Several weeks had passed when again the serenity of the late evening was disturbed by the doorbell. Fat Jow shuffled in soft slippers across the cathedral-vaulted foyer, to swing open the heavy front door.

Again the importer was standing under the dim porch light. Before Fat Jow could release his anger, he said, "I do not ask to come in." He pointed toward a taxicab waiting with lights on and engine running. "I have been in Canada on business, and I come now directly from the airport with a consignment of oriental merchandise that you have ordered."

"I have ordered nothing," said Fat Jow. "Please to go away."

"As you wish . . . but what then shall I do with the consignment? He is so fatigued with traveling, that he fell asleep in the cab, and I had not the heart to wake him."

A spark of hope revived within Fat Jow. "He?" he whispered, and

followed the beckoning importer down to the cab.

Stretched asleep across the rear seat, wincing drowsily against the dome light that flashed on when the door opened, was a diminutive figure in blue coat and cap.

"Hsiang Yuen!" said Fat Jow hoarsely. He drew the importer beyond the hearing of the cab driver, asked then with stolid resignation, "And what price, how many assignments, does she demand of me in return?"

"No assignments," said the importer kindly, "no demands, no conditions. I was to deliver only the boy, and this message." He handed Fat Jow a small sealed envelope.

Hands trembling slightly, Fat Jow opened it, held it in the glow from the dome light.

A brief note: "Decent people on both sides. Good luck. D.S."

Suddenly Fat Jow was smiling so broadly that his jaw muscles ached, and he was not ashamed of the tears upon his cheeks.



Oftimes one may find it advantageous to plumb the depths of perception that others cannot hope to reach.

A FLOWER in her



WHILE you're here, I s'pose I better take you over to see Aunt Abbie."

"Aunt Abbie?" questioned the girl. "Who is she?"

"Well, she ain't really an aunt, but she's some relation . . ." Melinda's voice trailed off as her memory attempted to locate the offshoot on the family tree that was Aunt Abbie. "Bein' my second cousin, I guess she's pretty fur removed from you." She gazed at her visitor uncertainly, then her eyes turned resolute. "But she's blood kin, so you should see her."

"Why?" The girl was growing impatient of distant family ties woven to strangle her in this strange country of her mother's.

Melinda bustled. "She's the rec-

ord keeper. Got second sight, too."

"When do we have to go?" Tradition and folklore were losing their piquancy.

Again Melinda looked doubtfully upon the city-bred frailty of her guest. "Well, it's quite a piece. Rough ground. But I guess we better get over there today, you're leavin' so soon."

The girl sighed, mentally ticking off the hours left to her here.

In the hot sun she followed in the wake of Melinda's angular maturity, which plowed a furrow through weeds and thistle, over boulder-strewn hillsides bare of trees and bristling with prickly growth which offered no protection from the beating heat.

At last, Melinda turned to look at the girl behind her. "We better stop and rest awhile, I guess." She eased her bulk down carefully, watching her companion slump to the ground. "Tired, ain'tcha?"

The girl nodded.

"I shoulda remembered you ain't used to this kind o' country. Your face sure is flushed."

The girl thrust out a lower lip to blow cooling air across her cheeks.

"You redheads sunburn, don'tcha?"

Again the girl nodded.

Melinda turned reflective. "Don't know that there ever was a red-head in the family before . . ."

"My father had auburn hair."

"Oh. I never seen him. Your ma's hair was black's a raven's wing."

"I remember."

Melinda heaved herself to her broad feet. "Might's well get goin' if we want to get back by sun-down. Ain't fur now." She pointed. "Just up the hill and over to

the ridge. See it in a little bit."

The cabin finally appeared in the distance, like a lookout on the rim.

Staring curiously, the girl asked, "Is that it?"

"That's it. Aunt Abbie's lived there now goin' on fifty year."

"How old is she?"

They had reached the summit. The cabin squatted beneath bowed trees that held hands over its roof.

"She must be over seventy now. Spry, though. Spry's a chicken." Melinda took a sidelong glance at her weary companion. "Climbs these hills like a mountain goat when she's a mind to."

The girl knew even a gentle thrust when she felt one. Her mouth tightened. "Well," she said flatly, "I just hope she's spry enough to get me a nice cold drink of water."

"She'll have grapejuice. Always keeps a pitcherful down in the cave."

The girl paused to stare over the ridge and into the gorge below. She backed up, trembling . . . unfamiliar country . . . eccentric natives. "Are you sure she's home?"

"Aunt Abbie? Oh, sure. She don't go noplac. Always busy," Melinda said with certainty as she stepped through a broken gate and up a path hemmed in by weed-choked flowers.

The door was open. Melinda

poked her head through. "Aunt Abbie," she shrieked. Behind her, the girl stumbled over a claw hammer at the sill. She kicked it aside and into the weeds.

"Aunt Abbie," shouted Melinda again.

"Yes, yes, yes. I'm a-comin'."

Erupting from the shadows, peering into the sunlight, Aunt Abbie strained forward. As Melinda had said, she was spry, as spry as a taut steel spring. Her meager nose projected itself before her. Her dark eyes were lodestones and her mouth an iron bar.

"Oh, it's you, Melinda. Who's that you got with you?"

Melinda stepped aside to give the girl an abrupt shove into the room. "This here's Marty's girl. She's been stoppin' with us a couple days."

Aunt Abbie sifted relationships through her mind. "Marty's girl." Inspecting her, she reached forth a clawlike hand with a feather touch. The girl drew minutely away. "Come in. Come in and set down."

Sidling into the room, the girl backed to a chair, feeling the slick, wooden arms of it with her fingertips. As she sat on the edge of the broken cane seat, Aunt Abbie stood before her. Again the claws reached out. "Marty's girl. Such pretty red hair." Talons hovered over the girl's shining head, sus-

pending there. "Such awful pretty red hair." Aunt Abbie turned to Melinda. "Did you ever see such pretty red hair?"

Melinda shook her head. "Can't say I ever did. Guess I never seen any red hair in this family before. She says she got it from her pa."

The girl shrank, her eyes moving cautiously from Aunt Abbie to the objects in the room—cluttered and stacked souvenirs—a chaos of remembrance.

"She's thirsty," suggested Melinda.

Aunt Abbie took another covetous look at the flaming hair. "Such a pretty red. Yes, Melinda. I'll fetch some grapejuice." She scuttled from the room.

The girl heard a door slam, quick, staccato footsteps descending.

The room grew brighter as her eyes adjusted. "So much stuff," she murmured.

"Aunt Abbie keeps everything," Melinda explained proudly. "All the family records too. Them rugs she made from relations' clothes."

As Melinda gestured with humble admiration, the girl looked down upon the oblongs, circles, hooked and braided, crocheted and cross-stitched; utilization of the rags of memory, placed in precision like an army, white pine boards between the battalions.

"She made all them samplers, too."

The girl raised her eyes to stare at the walls with their exquisite needlework. Each square of cloth threaded with a MAY HE REST IN PEACE or derivative. "When they die," explained Melinda, "she stitches 'em up."

The girl shuddered, drowned in her own morbid fascination. Her eyes fixed themselves on the bright colors of death.

"I'll try and get Aunt Abbie to show you the wreath," Melinda whispered, her eyes rolling, her breast swelling beneath coarse cotton, her large spare body quivering with anticipation.

The girl offered no answering interest, intent only upon the sound of scrambling footsteps as they returned. Her every thought, every desire, was to get away from here, from the saffron face of Aunt Abbie, her nimble tread, the heavy cup pushed so gently, ever so insidiously, into her hand.

The girl sipped the cold, dark liquid.

"Good, ain't it?" prodded Melinda.

She nodded with a faint smile and a thread of purple parting her lips. Stiffly then, with eyes averted, she placed the half-full cup on the marble-topped table at her side.

Aunt Abbie stood lightly on a

hooked memorial, watching her. "Your ma had black hair." She turned to Melinda. "Remember how dark Marty's hair was?"

Melinda nodded. "I thought maybe you'd show us your you-know-what . . ."

Aunt Abbie looked speculatively at the girl. She extended a hand, fingers curved, almost touching the bright hair. "I'll fetch it."

The girl was deep in the chair now, feeling the stiff, jagged ends of broken cane. Her stomach curled; streaks of cold hunched her shoulders. Sluggishly, she gazed out at the shaft of sunshine in the doorway.

"Oh, the book of records, too," called Melinda, leaning forward as Aunt Abbie returned to squat before the girl.

Carefully, Aunt Abbie laid the large gilt frame on a braided rug. She opened a book upon her knees.

"That," explained Melinda, "is the family record. The first part shows the birthings. The last part, the dyings."

Aunt Abbie flipped pages, her sepia fingers fondling the last of them, clean and unwritten. "How old are you, my dear?"

"Twenty-four."

"Just twenty-four. Well, well. Your ma lived to be . . . let's see . . ." she leafed back. "Thirty-two. Your branch of the family al-

ways did go young. Your pa ain't in here. He wan't kin."

"Dad died last year."

"You're all alone?"

"Well, yes . . ."

"Except for us."

The girl was hazily displeased with the tie-in. "I'm just passing through here," she said in minor revolt, "on my way home. To the coast," she added, feeling the necessity of identity, a longing for familiarity.

"Well, well, well," Aunt Abbie crooned absently. Her mind seemed to wander as her eyes studied the girl. "Well," and she smiled, her lips sucking her teeth briskly. "So you want to see the wreath?"

"Wreath?"

"The hair wreath." Aunt Abbie placed the book on the floor and picked up the oval gilt frame. Its curves caught the beams of light from the doorway. She held it up against her knees, her fingers holding it in place. Steadily, she watched the girl.

The girl stared down and into a circlet of flowers painstakingly woven against the linen background. Twined into the floral hoop bloomed the white of cherry blossom, the gray of cactus spine, yellow daisies, brown iris, ashen lilies, goldenrod . . .

Aunt Abbie bent her head, her liver-colored claw pointing out a

portion of the wreath. "See them? Them are black-eyed Susans. The centers come straight from your ma's hair. Pretty, ain't they?" The finger caressed the glossy black.

"My mother's hair?" The girl drew back, held her breath and allowed her face to blank out in utter disbelief.

"This here's made of hair. Didn't you know?"

The girl stared glassily at this incredible woman and her absurd handwork. She felt the sharp gouge of broken cane and the hard rungs of the chair against her back.

"It's got hair in it from every one of the family that's passed on."

Melinda hitched closer, tipping her head as she gazed proudly down upon the wreath. "Ain't it pretty now? Ain't it just elegant?" She shook her head with wonder. "How she does it, I'll never know—all them fine hairs, the little bitty stitches. I wouldn't never have the patience."

"You mean that's hair?" The girl clung to the arms of the chair because here was substance, here reality. "Human hair? All of it?"

Aunt Abbie nodded, pleased. "Just the family though," she qualified with dignity. "I wan't never one to fool with any that ain't kin."

"And all those people are dead?"

Rising, Aunt Abbie leaned the frame against a table and stepped

back to view it. "That's how I keep 'em. It's a kind of memorial. Shows my respect, sort of."

The girl stared at her, then back to the wreath. Her lips stretched, her nostrils flared.

"See?" Aunt Abbie's long finger pointed. "I ain't got that rose in yet." Reflectively, she gazed at the girl in the chair. "I just got the rose left."

The empty spot severed the circle like a break in a wedding ring. Outlines of rose petals had been sketched upon the linen. "It's all that's left. Once I get that in, the wreath'll be done."

The room began to swing, the wreath whirled concentrically, wreath within wreath, circle upon circle. Heat held the girl's body; chill released it. She placed an uncertain hand before her eyes. "I'm a little sick," she whispered weakly. Attempting to rise, she stumbled, and was caught in Melinda's strong but gentle grasp.

"She's a city girl," she faintly heard Melinda apologize. "She ain't used to the walk we took. We'll lay her on your cot, Aunt Abbie."

She felt herself half-dragged, half-carried, through rolling blackness.

Melinda stepped from the sleep-room while Aunt Abbie tarried to stroke the shining hair on the pil-

low. Melinda paused in thought.

"She's a pretty sick girl. Too much sun, maybe. Her skin looks kinda green, don't it?"

"Such pretty, pretty red hair," said Aunt Abbie.

"Could be . . ." Melinda hesitated, absorbed now with a problem, beset by it and confused, "could be I best go home alone and get Tom to come back with the truck and fetch her." She looked upon Aunt Abbie for confirmation. "She couldn't never walk through them hills again the way she—"

"You do that." Aunt Abbie's decision was immediate and definite. She urged Melinda to the door, through it and out into the sunshine. "There ain't no hurry now. Not a mite of it. I'll tend to the girl. Don't you worry on it. I'll see she gets a nice long sleep."

Without a single backward glance, Melinda walked over the boulders in the setting sun. Familiar with Aunt Abbie's competent hands and second sight, she felt a sense of accomplishment. Hadn't Aunt Abbie cured Old Opal of the jumps? And predicted the death of little Junie May? Nobody believed her that time, the baby being so fat and rosy-like. But lo and behold! Junie May died like *that*! Melinda, in recollection, chopped the air with her hand. That child's hair turned into the

brightest yellow buttercups of them all.

When Tom arrived at near-dark, Melinda told him, "There ain't no rushin' hurry. Aunt Abbie'll take care of the girl good. It's best we don't unsettle her rest tonight. We'll fetch her first thing in the mornin' though, so's she can catch her train."

At daybreak, Melinda was pleased to relax on the seat of the truck. She spread her dress down over her thighs and leaned back against the wooden brace. The trip to Aunt Abbie's didn't take long this way, through dust-streaked fennel and the cool clear dawn.

"We'll fetch her right back home so's she can pack up. It sure makes a girl puny to raise her up in the city. You wouldn't think that a bit of walk like that would get her to ailin', now, would you? She's a sweet little thing, though, even if she ain't healthy. I've growed real fond on her."

Aunt Abbie's cabin crouched in the shadow of the trees, a dreary and somnolent recluse. Melinda walked around it to the open door. She kicked a hammer from the sill into the weeds, and bent over to pick up a pocket mirror from the warped floor.

Inside, Aunt Abbie formed a pale sickle of absorption in the shadows, intent upon her needle,

the gilt frame propped before her.

"How is she?" called Melinda.

Aunt Abbie turned slowly to peer through the gloom. "How's who?"

"Why, Marty's girl, Aunt Abbie. She got to ailin' while we was visitin' yesterday. Remember?"

Aunt Abbie's mind seemed to reach back into all the yesterdays where it groped, fumbled, poked and pried. "Oh, the redhead." She turned back to her work and, with great care, slid her needle into the linen, the copper-red strand glinting against the half-finished rose. "Well now, Melinda, did I tell you I seen death on that girl?"

Melinda clutched her heart and knew sudden terror. Then she rocked back to awe and veneration. "You seen that, Aunt Abbie? Like you seen it in Junie May?" Melinda was hypnotized by the shine of a wondrous second sight.

"Just the same," said Aunt Abbie nodding. "Just the same," and took another stitch.

"You mean she's dead now, Aunt Abbie?"

"She's dead now."

Aunt Abbie's words impaled Melinda's mind, to send her glance, slant-eyed, around the shadows of the room, searching out, yet sliding from the girl's departed soul.

It was then Melinda discovered the mirror in her hand—the mir-

ror she had found on the porch. With reverence, she placed it, clear as a circular pond, upon the marble-topped table. She felt a moment's sharp grief for Marty's girl, quickly followed by respect for Aunt Abbie's ever-accurate prognostications. Melinda's breast was full of sorrow and it almost burst with pride.

With humility, Melinda took a step closer to the wreath. The rose had begun to take form, bright and shining, under Aunt Abbie's able fingers. "Where is she?" asked Melinda in hushed tones. "Did you lay her out on your cot, Aunt Abbie?"

"She went walkin' to death, Melinda." Aunt Abbie turned from her work and pierced Melinda with eyes that held the gift of knowledge. "Some folk do that, Melinda. They go walkin' out to meet their death. Marty's girl went out to meet hers and tumbled right over into the gorge."

Melinda could see it—the girl with outstretched arms—the gorge a black and yawning mouth.

"She's there *now*?" Melinda asked.

"Right down in the gorge. A broken flower." Aunt Abbie returned to the wreath.

Melinda watched the bright hair snake through linen. She was fully aware that Aunt Abbie never

snipped a live lock. Never. How many times had she observed Aunt Abbie's assistance to the dying? The mirror held patiently near to parted lips until no further fog clouded the surface. THEN came the slash of scissors, and an aster grew upon the wreath, a russet chrysanthemum—now a rose.

Melinda's sorrowful, pride-filled mind knew perplexity. If Marty's girl had walked to death, had toppled over the rim and dropped deep in the gorge to meet it, how had Aunt Abbie gone through the rites, those never-changing rites of the mirror, the slash of blades and the lock of hair?

Melinda retreated a reluctant step.

How?

Melinda's mind groped for understanding through its fog of indecision. Aunt Abbie was spry, spry as a mountain goat, but Melinda hadn't known she was spry enough to spring up the sheer face of the gorge—with scissors, hair and a mirror in her hand.

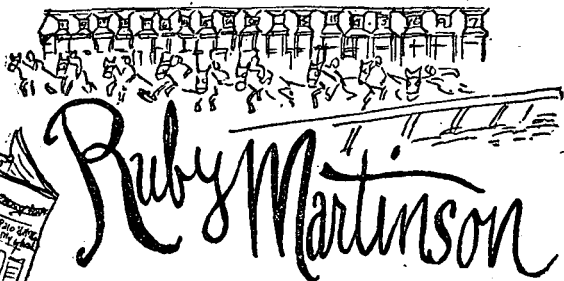
Melinda heaved a final sigh of acceptance. She guessed she was, though. Aunt Abbie, with her second sight and her talent for keeping the record, could do most anything, Melinda guessed.

"That's a mighty pretty rose," she said at last.

"Mighty pretty. And ain't it red?"

Perhaps a safe wager is indeed possible on Ruby, but one might well wonder which way, and even to what extent.

You Can Bet on



by
Henry Slesar

I HAD three chronic worries when I was eighteen, (a) Unemployment, (b) Girls, and (c) my cousin, Ruby Martinson. All three inflicted permanent scars on my nervous system, but I eventually became accustomed to the first two problems. There was no getting used to Ruby. Housing the brain and soul of a Master Criminal in the slight body of a 23-year-old accountant, constantly inventing Fiendish Schemes for the amassing

of illegal booty, and worst of all, employing me as his Henchman, Accomplice, and Mob all in one, Ruby made my late teens a time of lunatic terror and turmoil. His notable lack of success never daunted him, and at each rendezvous at Hector's Cafeteria on Broadway, I knew he would have some new Diabolical Plan for me to digest along with my coffee and crullers.

One Tuesday evening, after a fruitless day of job hunting, spent mainly in the penny arcades, I met Ruby in the rear of Hector's and found him deep in Literature. It was a peculiar kind of publication, printed in green ink.

"Hi, Ruby," I said. "Whatcha

reading? Can I see it next, huh?"

"Quiet," he growled. "I'm dop-ing out the fifth."

This was pretty cryptic, so I sat back and waited for enlightenment.

"I got it," he said at last. "Beady Eyes is a mudder."

"Gee, congratulations," I said. "How much does the baby weigh?"

"Don't be funny," he said. "This is a dope sheet for horses, and I'm workin' out the races. Only this time, I'm playing it smart. I'm through making sucker bets. From now on, the suckers come to me!"

"Gosh, Ruby, I didn't know you bet on horses. Do you make any money at it?"

"Not a dime until now. But I got something worked out. We're going into business, pal. We're gonna make a fortune!"

This was a familiar Ruby-like statement, but it never failed to make me saucer-eyed with curiosity.

"This guy who takes my bets is going out of town," he said. "He's moving to Florida, and that means his spot is open for some smart operator. I asked him if I could have the franchise, and he said sure, why not?"

"I don't understand, Ruby. You taking another job?"

"Don't be such a jerk! This guy

is a bookie, see? He's an independent, workin' out of the Venetian Pool Hall on Thirty-Third Street. And we're taking over the racket!"

"A bookie?" I quavered. "Ruby, isn't that illegal?"

He looked at me pityingly. "There's a million bookies in this town, and they all get away with it. Why shouldn't we get some of that gravy? All you gotta do is hang around the Venetian with a red-striped tie and take bets from the suckers. Then you bring the book and the dough to me."

"Wait a minute! You mean *I'm* taking the bets?"

"Who else? You're unemployed, but I'm not. You're my runner, see? I'll give you forty percent of the profits. It's the easiest dough you ever earned in your life."

There was something nutty about Ruby's arithmetic, since I was obviously going to take 100% of the risks for 40% of the income. I told him this and got a punch on the elbow for an answer. It's a good thing Ruby was such a light little guy, because he was always punctuating his conversation with bops on my arm.

"But Ruby, there's an awful lot of tough guys hang around that pool hall. What kind of company is that for a young boy like me?"

"Here," he said, handing me the

green sheets, "this is the lineup for tomorrow's races. Buy yourself a red-striped tie and a notebook, and report to the Venetian at ten o'clock tomorrow." He leered at me. "You got a job, kid. Your mother will be glad to hear it."

I hadn't thought of it that way. "Gee, you're right. It is a kind of job, isn't it?"

When I got home that night, I told my mother the good news and she smiled all over her face.

"So what kind of job is it?" she asked.

"It's kind of like bookkeeping," I said. Boy, did that make her happy.

The next morning, I bought a candy-striped cravat from a shifty-eyed character on the street. Then I got myself a notebook, a mechanical pencil, and went to the pool hall. I felt real businesslike.

It was only ten o'clock in the morning, but there were already four big guys shooting a game of snooker. Every one of them looked like George Raft. The place smelled like a Turkish locker room, and the floor hadn't been swept in so long that there were still some Sweet Caporal butts lying around. At eleven, three other thugs wandered in, and by noon it looked like a convention of Gangs, Inc. Finally, one guy with a three-day beard came over to me

and looked thoughtfully at my red-striped tie.

"Where's Lou?" he said.

"Lou ain't here," I squeaked. "Lou's in Florida."

"Then what's with the tie? That's Lou's tie."

"I'm taking Lou's bets now," I grinned feebly. "Did you want to make a bet, mister?"

He looked doubtful, then took the green sheets out of my pocket and skimmed them quickly. "Sweet Pickle in the third at Jamaica," he said. Then he handed me a crumpled fiver. "On the nose."

"Yes, sir!" I said. He walked off, swinging a cue stick like a baton, and I made a notation in my little book. I was very proud of it. All of a sudden, I knew why Ruby liked being an accountant. I thought about buying myself a green eyeshade and wearing rubber bands on my shirtsleeves.

Half an hour later, I had a second customer. He was playing pool in a T-shirt, and I never saw so many muscles in my life. I didn't know that pool was such good exercise. Everybody called him Duke, and when he put twenty dollars on a horse named Panicky Pete, it was kind of a signal that I was all right, and the bets started coming in faster. By noon, I must have had close to a hundred dol-

lars stuffed into my strained jeans.

When I met Ruby at Hector's at six, I was flushed with excitement. I showed him a fistful of bills and crowed.

"What a business, Ruby! Almost a hundred bucks!"

We counted it, and it was exactly ninety-seven. "Didn't I tell you?" Ruby grinned. "This is a lot better than pushing one of them garment trucks, right?"

"Boy, you bet it is, Ruby, you bet! When do I get my forty percent, huh, Ruby?"

"Wait a minute, dope, we can't keep all the money. We may have to pay out a few bucks."

"Huh?" I had forgotten that part of the operation. I watched Ruby open the evening newspaper to the sports section and start checking the race results. He told me to grab my notebook.

"These are the Jamaica finishes," he said. "Got any horses in the first race?"

"Two," I said. "Attila to win, Serenade to place."

Ruby chuckled. "Losers!" he said.

We went through the next eight races, and every one was a loser. We were feeling pretty ecstatic, until we got to Panicky Pete. I thought it had been kind of silly of Duke to put so much money on this horse, since it said plain as

day in the green sheets that he had a habit of losing races. But he must have been more panicky than usual, on account of he won his race by several lengths, and paid sixteen dollars for every two.

"What a shame," I said. "We won't have much left, will we, Ruby?"

Ruby was sweating over the figures. When he looked up, he was pretty panicky himself.

"We're out sixty-three dollars," he said. "How much money do you have, kid? Your own money?"

"Me? A dollar and three cents."

Ruby searched his skinny wallet. He had twelve dollars.

"It can't happen all the time, Ruby," I said. "I mean, bookies must make money *some* days."

"Sure they do," Ruby said. "But if we welsh on these bets, we'll never get any others. Besides—those guys at the Venetian don't like welshers. They're apt to play human pool with them, if you know what I mean."

I had a sudden picture of my head rolling into a side pocket.

"Ruby," I said in a quivering voice, "I think I'll retire from the bookie business. Would you like to buy a tie?"

"We gotta get that money!" Ruby thumped the table with his small fist. "We can't spoil every-

thing now! We're on our way!"

"Ruby, it's a lousy business," I pleaded. "I don't like the clientele. They've got muscles, Ruby."

"You gotta go back tomorrow. Tell 'em you'll pay 'em in a week or so. It's the only way!"

"I can't go there tomorrow! They'll kill me, Ruby!"

"I'll kill you tonight if you don't! I'll get that fifty bucks, don't worry about it!"

"Gee, I just remembered," I said. "Tomorrow is the day I get my hay fever shots."

Ruby put his hand on the knot of my new tie and squeezed. "You be there, buster! You ain't running out now, understand?"

I understood, but I didn't like it.

I sneaked into the Venetian at eleven the next morning, hoping I might get enough new bet money to take care of the difference. But instead of bettors, I found them lined up on me like a Cashier's Window. Duke came over and grinned at me. He had muscles even in his mouth.

"Give," he said. "A hundred and sixty bucks, kid."

I gave him what money I had.

"Sir," I said, clearing my throat, "there is something I wish to discuss with you."

He turned his cue stick upside down so I could see the blunt

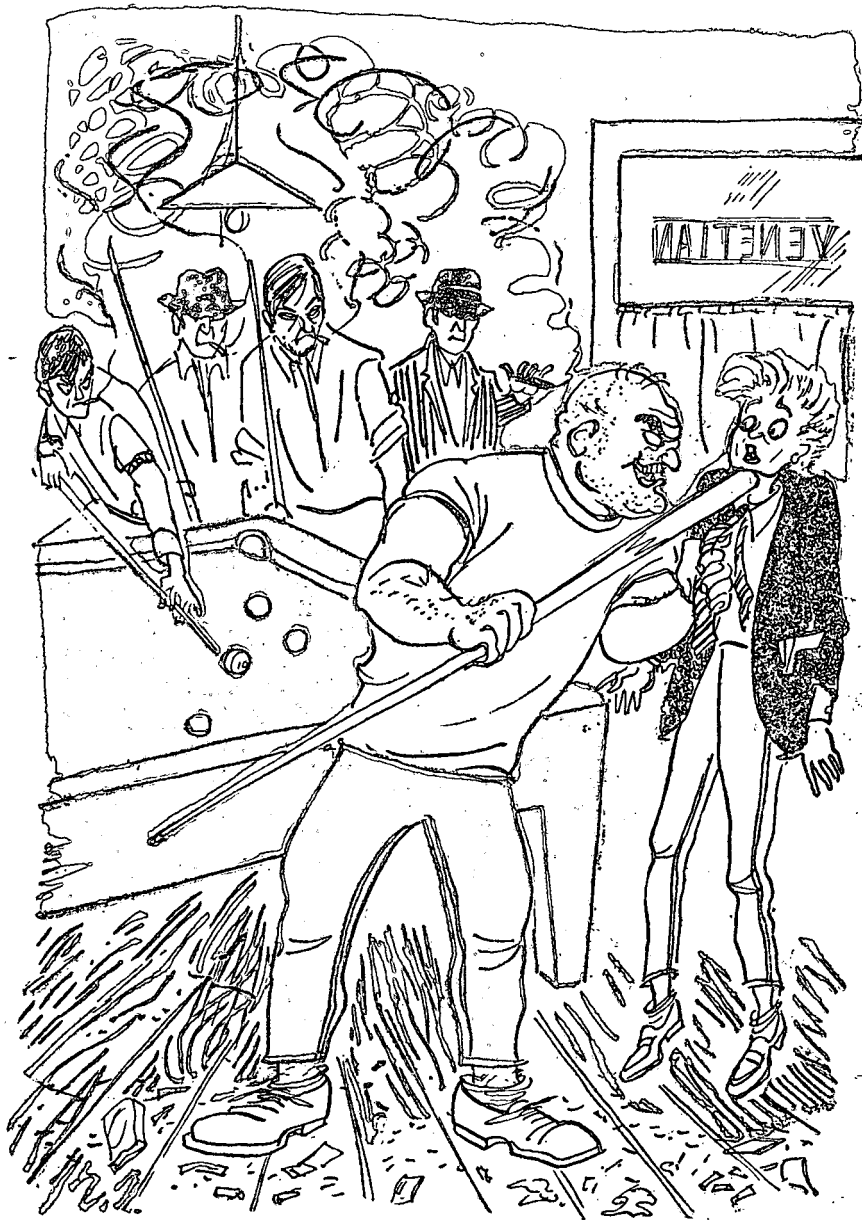
end. Then he smiled nicely. "Yes, kid?" he said.

"Sir," I said, "due to circumstances beyond our control—"

He put the stick butt under my chin and tilted my head up. "You're shy fifty bucks, kid," he said, still smiling. "Are you some kind of wise guy? Look fellas, a wise guy." The beef patrol moved in closer and I really thought it was the end. "What about it, wise guy? You taking Lou's bets, or are you welshing? You know what happens to welshers?"

"I'll get you the money," I said hoarsely. "I swear I'll get it!"

"Sure you will," Duke said pleasantly. "Like five o'clock, kid. That's when we'll be expecting you." He removed the cue stick and went calmly back to his game. So did everybody else. I sat there, wondering what ships were leaving port that afternoon, and how one went about becoming a stow-away. It would be nice if I could get a ship to the South Seas. I liked hot weather, but I didn't know if I could stand all those tropical fungi. I got athlete's foot just by reading sneaker ads. With my head filled with crazy thoughts like that, I went into the street. I considered throwing myself in front of the nearest limousine and settling my liability claim with the owner right on the spot. I de-



YOU CAN BET ON RUBY MARTINSON.

31

cided on an even more sensible course; I went to a phone booth and called Ruby.

"I got till five o'clock," I said hysterically. "Then they kill me. What should I do?"

"Relax," Ruby said.

"Gee, thanks, I never thought of that, Ruby, thanks a lot."

"Look, kid, I'm in a meeting with my boss. Just stall 'em, that's all. They won't hurt you."

"But, Ruby," I said. The phone clicked.

I went out into the street again. I saw a cop on the corner and got an idea. If I was arrested, they couldn't blame me for not showing up at the Venetian. All I had to do was kick the cop in the shins, and I was safe.

I went up to the cop. "Sir?" I said.

"Yes?" he said.

"Nothing," I said. I forgot to mention that I was a coward.

I walked the streets for half an hour, wishing I had something to pawn. All I had at home was a stack of bubble gum baseball cards, a roll of tinfoil the size of my head, and a collection of cola bottle caps which I had started when I was eleven. Some kid had told me they might be legal tender some day, and I optimistically believed him. Even when I knew better, I kept on saving them out

of habit. I have a lot of habits.

Then I realized I *did* have something to sell. My blood!

I went to a telephone directory in a corner drug store and looked up Blood Banks. There was one on Forty-First Street off Madison. I took a bus there.

You can imagine how desperate this move was—I was one of these people who get deathly ill at the sight of anyone's blood, to say nothing of my own—but I figured I had a choice of being bled either way, and this seemed preferable.

The Blood Bank offices were on the fifteenth floor, and they looked like hospital wards. There was a woman in a white uniform at the front desk.

"What can I do for you?" she said.

"How much do you pay for blood?" I asked.

"Ten dollars a pint," she said. "Do you wish to become a donor?"

I did some quick figuring on my fingers. "I want to sell five pints," I said. "Where do I go?"

She smiled. "I'm afraid it isn't as simple as that. For one thing, you'll have to have a physical examination. And you can't donate more than a pint at a time. Just fill out this card, and we'll make a doctor's appointment for you."

"But I have to make my donation *now*," I panted. "I'm not sure

whether I'll *have* any blood later."

She looked dubious, but picked up the telephone on her desk and spoke to somebody inside. A couple of minutes later, a white-coated type with gray hair came out and looked me over. Then he told me to walk into his office.

I sat down at his desk, and he pulled out a long sheet of paper. I stared at him in what must have been anticipatory terror, because he grinned and said, "What's the matter, son? Afraid of doctors?"

"Who, me? Oh, no! I see *hundreds* of doctors."

"You do?" He frowned. "Have you been sick a lot?"

"Sick? Me?" I laughed airily. "I've never been sick a day! I just have little things wrong. I get treatments for my sinuses. And hay fever shots."

"Hay fever?" He put the form back in the drawer. "Sorry, son, you can't do any good here. We can't accept blood from anyone with a history of allergies."

"But you've *got* to accept me! Couldn't you use my blood for experiments or something?"

"Sorry," he said.

He wasn't half as sorry as I was. When I left the building, I took a look at the big clock outside a jeweler's, and it told me I had three hours to pay off Gangs, Inc.

I was looking glumly into the

window of a dress shop when the inspiration struck me. The guy in the window was fitting a blonde wig on the head of a naked mannequin, and I recalled reading about the market for human hair. Now, if there was one thing I had it was hair. Bushels of it grew all over my scalp, most of it straight up. I made a wild run to the nearest phone directory, and found the listing for wigmakers. There were quite a few, and the most convenient was an outfit called Desiree Transformations, located at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Ninth Street. I ran all the way there, thankful that I had neglected to get my monthly haircut.

For a Fifth Avenue building, it was pretty seedy, and the office of the Desiree Company looked more like a hat factory. The place was full of cardboard boxes and bald dummy heads, and the woman at the switchboard snarled like she hated me. When I told her I wanted to see somebody about selling hair, she grumbled and summoned out a small, fat man who wore his tie loose around his neck. He could have used a transformation himself. He had sandwich crumbs at the corner of his mouth, and he breathed like a horse.

"What do you want, kid?" he said.

"I want to sell some hair," I

said. "You buy hair, don't you?"
"Sure, sometimes. Where'd you get hair to sell, kid?"

"It's my own hair," I said. "Look at it. You want to buy my hair?"

He blinked at me like I was crazy, and gave a kind of maniacal laugh. "You pulling my leg?" he said.

"Do you want to buy it or don't you?" I said. "I got lots of offers for my hair, you better snap it up." I don't know why I said such a nutty thing, but I wasn't myself.

"Listen, kid, you don't know what you're talking about. We buy ladies' hair, even for men's toupees we use ladies' hair. Besides, you ain't got enough there to make half a pound." He laughed again, in that screwy cracked voice.

"I'll tell you what," I said desperately. "I'll sell it to you in installments. I mean, my hair grows fast, honest. I'll come back here as long as it takes."

He laughed again, so hard that he had to stamp his feet and turn around in little circles. Behind him, the woman at the switchboard startled to cackle like a hysterical hen.

"Listen," he said, red in the face from laughing, "listen, what do you think you are, a hair farm?"

I stiffened with dignity. "I didn't come here to be insulted," I said.

At this point, I had less than two

hours to raise the money. The only practical thing to do was make out my will, but there wasn't much I could leave anybody. I wasn't even insured. Even my dead body wasn't worth anything.

Or was it? I seemed to recall hearing about people selling their bodies to science. The idea of being dissected by a bunch of pimply-faced medical students didn't appeal to me, but it seemed like the only recourse. Only where did one go to sell his body?

I checked the telephone directory once more, but it yielded nothing under Bodies, Corpses, or Dissection; I could probably inquire at a hospital, but by the time I got through all the bureaucratic channels, it would be too late. The next idea was more logical: I'd ask a doctor.

Dr. Baumgarter wasn't exactly our family doctor, since the only time I saw him was at the clinic where he gave me my sinus treatments and sneeze shots. But he had a private practice, too, and when I called at his office on Lexington Avenue, he was luckily in residence. He was a real friendly-type old physician, with white hair like Santa Claus, and he was just a little bit deaf. For some reason, he liked me, and I got a big hello.

"Sit down, sit down," he said cheerily. "How come you weren't

at the clinic today? How's your mother?"

"She's fine," I said. "Listen, Dr. Baumgartner, do you know where I can go to sell my body?"

"Eh? What body?"

"My body. I want to sell it to science. Where do I go for that, do you know?"

He sat back in the swivel chair and stared at me. "Sometimes I don't hear so good," he said. "It sounded to me like you wanted to sell your body."

"I mean it," I said. "I need money awful bad, Doctor. I've got to sell my body before five o'clock, or I'll be in terrible trouble. Can you help me?"

He put his hand over his mouth and looked me over with a kind of strained expression. "Well, I don't know. It's not such a big body. How much do you weigh?"

"A hundred and thirty pounds," I said. "Do they pay by the pound?"

"No, not exactly. What's so important about the money?"

"I can't tell you that. It's a matter of life or death. If I don't get the money this afternoon, I'll have to run away from home or something. Could you please help me?"

He cleared his throat with a funny noise, and stood up. He walked over to the window and rattled the shade for a while. When he came

back, he was wiping his eyes. I guess I must have touched him.

"Well, I'll tell you what I could do. I could fill out an application for you myself, and you could sign your body over to me."

"You could?"

"Sure, if it's that important," he said.

"Gee, that would be great. When could I get the money?"

"How much do you need?"

"It's got to be fifty dollars. Do you think that's too much?"

He studied me with his head cocked. "Well, I don't know. If you promise to take good care of it, give it three good meals a day, plenty of rest and exercise—maybe we could make a deal."

"I promise," I said fervently. "I'll take good care of it, Doctor, honest!"

"After all, your body will belong to science once you sign the paper. And a contract is a contract."

"I swear I will! I'll make it the healthiest dead body they ever got!"

"Well, all right then." He went to a file cabinet and rummaged around until he found a sheet of paper filled with tiny type. He brought it to the desk and pointed to the dotted line on the bottom. "Just sign right there," he said.

I signed it. The minute I did, I had a sense of loss. Then he took

out his wallet and handed me two twenties and a ten.

"Just remember what I said," he told me gravely. "You take good care of yourself. I'll be seeing you at the clinic once a month, to check up on the propensity."

"Don't worry," I said, pocketing the money.

It was four-thirty by the time I got out. I walked rapidly to the Venetian Pool Hall, making only one stop. It was at a place called the Health House. I had a glass of carrot juice. It was awful.

When I met Ruby at Hector's Cafeteria that night, he took one look at the milk I brought to the table, and said, "What's with the milk? You always drink coffee."

"Not anymore," I said gloomily. "And it's all your fault, Ruby. I'll tell you one thing, though. You can get yourself another bookie. I'm through!"

"Whatcha cryin' about?" he said contemptuously. "You paid off those guys, didn't you? What have you got to worry about?"

"Plenty," I said bitterly. "I had to sell my body to science to make that dough." I shivered. "Just the thought of it makes me sick. All those students cutting me up into tiny little pieces!"

"Sell your body? Are you kidding?"

I told him the story. He listened with whatever passed for sympathy in Ruby's distorted nature. Then he grinned.

"Is that all that's bothering you? Heck, we can fix that. I'll give you the fifty bucks in a week or so, and you can buy it back."

"It's not as easy as that. I had to sign a paper. A contract is a contract."

Ruby chewed his lip. "Okay, then. So we'll swipe the paper!"

"What?"

"You heard me! If the guy won't sell you back your body, we'll find that contract and tear it up. You just leave it to me, kid."

It was one of the few Ruby Martinson crimes I readily agreed to. I gave him a diagram of the doctor's neighborhood and office, and told him what I knew about his hours. He digested everything into that criminal computer he used for a brain, and came up with the answer immediately. We would go into action two days later, on Saturday morning.

It was a worrisome two days. I was terrified of getting killed before Saturday morning, so all I wanted to do was lie in bed with the covers over my head. My mother thought I was sick, of course, and practically drowned me in chicken soup. By Friday night, I *was* sick. I think I had chicken-

pox of the stomach, and I couldn't keep anything down. She had the remedy for that, too, only it was more chicken soup.

On Saturday, I struggled out of bed against her objections, and met Ruby on the corner of the doctor's apartment building. The plan he had concocted was beautifully simple, one of Ruby's less involved schemes. He had made an appointment to see the doctor at ten-thirty. After he went in, I was to telephone Dr. Baumgartner. The phone was in the doctor's outer office; that would give Ruby time to hit the filing cabinet and locate the paper that consigned my body to the medical students.

I synchronized my watch with Ruby's, which wasn't easy since mine didn't work, and watched him enter the doctor's building. Then I went into a phone booth across the street, and dialed Baumgartner's number.

"Hello?"

"Is this Dr. Baumgartner?"

"Would you please talk a little louder?"

"Is this Dr. Baumgartner?" I shouted.

"Yes. Who is this?"

I told him who I was, and went into a long, complicated, and loud

explanation of my symptoms of the day before. I had to repeat them several times, but that only gave Ruby more time to search the files. At the end of it, Baumgartner recommended I get plenty of bed rest. "And drink some hot soup," he said.

After I hung up, I waited anxiously for Ruby to appear. When he showed up ten minutes later, waving the contract in his hand, I could have hugged him with happiness.

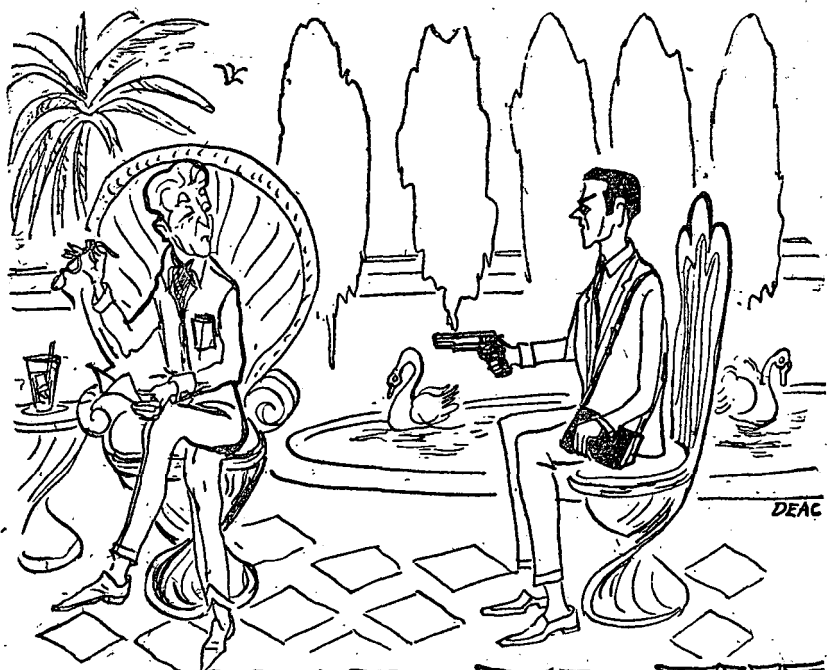
"You're a genius, Ruby! A genius!"

"And you're a dope," he said disgustedly, shoving the contract at me. "That guy didn't really want your body. He was just being nice to you. Take a look at what you signed."

I read the paper. It was something to do with permission to authorize a Caesarean section when I had my baby.

I sent Dr. Baumgartner his money two weeks later, and I stayed away from the Venetian Pool Hall. I don't know if Ruby ever fooled around with bookmaking again, but I did know that anybody who bet against my cousin, Ruby Martinson, was taking an awful chance.

Suddenly the relevance of monetary units and natural endowments is less equivocal.



SECOND TALENT

MANUEL ANDRADAS walked to the back of the mansion through the formal gardens that encircled it. Senhor Martinho was sitting at ease on the patio overlooking his

lily pond. He was sipping an iced drink and reading a pamphlet.

He glanced up in surprise as Manuel appeared. To his knowledge, he had never seen this small

unremarkable fellow with the muddy brown eyes before. "Who are you?" he asked sharply. "I didn't hear you ring." He put his drink down on the glass-topped table beside him.

The intruder had a camera case slung by a strap across his shoulder, and he presented his card with a half bow.

"Manuel Andradas, photographer," Martinho read aloud. "Oh, yes." He looked up at Manuel. "I know your work, Senhor. I've admired it often in *Rio Illustrated*." With the casual politeness of the very rich, he invited Manuel to sit down.

Manuel thanked him and took a straight chair directly facing his host's chaise. He was very pleased that Martinho knew his work and recognized his name. He said obliquely, "Since your servants are evidently out, I took the liberty of coming straight back, Senhor

By JAMES HOLDING

Martinho." Behind him, sunlight glinted brightly on the surface of the lily pond where a pair of swans floated in stately silence.

"Ah, yes, the servants' picnic, a

little treat I arrange for them annually. I had forgotten I am here alone today." Martinho leaned back. "Well, what do you wish of me then, Senhor Andradas? Permission to photograph my collection?" His collection of Pre-Columbian artifacts was world famous.

Manuel shook his head, then took a gun out of his jacket pocket. "No, Senhor," he said quietly. "I am here to kill you."

Aside from a startled flicker of the eyes, Martinho's lined face remained surprisingly calm. "Indeed," he said. "How extraordinary. I thought you were a photographer."

"I am," said Andradas. "A good one, I hope. Yet I have a second talent which pays better than photography."

"Killing for money, you mean?"

"I prefer to call it nullification," Manuel said with dignity. "There is no malice in it, you understand. With me, it is purely a matter of business. I make a living, you might say, out of your dying."

Martinho thought this might be intended as a joke. The photographer's thin lips, however, were not smiling, nor were his eyes. "I see," said Luis Martinho. "You are a professional, then?"

"Exactly."

"A professional would not sit

here talking for two minutes before administering the *coup de grace*. Therefore I think you bluff, Senhor. You attempt to put the fear of death in me so that you may thereby gain other ends. Am I not right?"

"Not even remotely right. I am here to kill you, and I shall do so. Never doubt it."

"Then why not get it over?" Martinho reached out an arm and placed his pamphlet on the table beside his drink.

That question had been troubling Manuel, too. This was a job like any other, so why dawdle over it? Could the explanation lie in the empathy of one artist for another? Was he obscurely reluctant to nullify Martinho because the collector was a man of artistic judgment who admired his, Manuel's work? He said to Martinho, "I am in no hurry if you are not."

Martinho licked his lips. "Do you do this sort of thing frequently? Kill people, I mean?"

"Only occasionally, Senhor."

"Who hired you to kill me?"

"I don't know. I know only the middleman, as it were. The broker." Manuel paused. It was against his rule to mention his employers. Yet what harm could it do when Martinho was virtually a dead man? "Have you ever

heard of the Corporation? The Big Ones?"

"Isn't it some sort of criminal organization?"

Manuel nodded. "It was the Corporation that arranged for me to nullify you . . . on behalf of some client unknown to me who will pay them generously for the service."

"Oh." Martinho sat quietly for a moment, then reached into his shirt pocket and drew out a packet of cigarettes. He offered one to Manuel. When the photographer refused with a shake of the head, the collector lit one for himself and returned the packet to his pocket. "A broker, indeed. Well, there is no doubt in my mind," Martinho said thoughtfully, "who is paying this Corporation of yours for my removal." He was very thoughtful.

"We all have enemies," Manuel said sententiously.

Martinho ignored him. "My nephew!" he said. "Who else would wish me dead?" A certain frenetic excitement came into his voice. "Of course. He is the poor relation. I am rich. He covets my collection for the second-rate museum of which he is curator. He knows he is my sole heir, but I am still quite robust, although old, as you see. So perhaps he has grown tired of waiting for me to

die in the usual fashion, eh, in the natural way? And he is attempting to expedite matters with your help? Then he inherits my money and my collection now, not sometime in the uncertain future, but immediately. What do you think of that hypothesis? Can you find a flaw in it?"

Manuel sat like a stone. "There are many reasons why men seek the Corporation's help."

"The ingrate!" Martinho was at last in the grip of violent emotion. "I refuse to die for him!"

"I'm afraid you have no choice, Senhor." Manuel's gun pointed unwaveringly at his middle.

The collector jerked upright in his lounge chair. "Wait! You said your killings pay better than your photography. Didn't you?"

The photographer nodded.

"Then you like money, quite obviously. Lots of it."

"I like it." An understatement.

"Look," said Martinho, pointing. "Those two Mochica vases beside the door over there are Peruvian antiquities. They are worth 5000 *novo* cruzeiros each."

Manuel's eyes went to the vases for a moment, then switched back to Martinho. The gun didn't budge. He said nothing.

"And over on that table near you," Martinho said, "that's a piece of molded black-ware pot-

tery of the Chimu empire. It's worth three thousand."

Shocked into speech, Manuel said, "If they are so valuable, you display them very carelessly, Senhor."

"Oh, they are locked safely away behind my numerous burglar alarms at night, with the rest of my collection. I bring a few treasures to the patio here each day for my own pleasure, you understand. I love to look at them."

"They don't look like much," Manuel said.

"No, they don't, do they? You'd rather have the money they'd bring?"

Manuel's expression did not change. "You are trying to buy your life with them."

"Well . . ."

"You can't. I told you I am a professional. When I make a contract, I do the work."

"That's a pity." Martinho reached out for his drink, brought the glass to his lips and took a sip. He was perspiring. "This thing I am using for an ashtray, do you know what it is?" he asked as he ground out his cigarette in it. "It is a polychrome eating plate of the Incas, five hundred years old, and worth ten thousand cruzeiros."

The photographer allowed his

eyes to flash to the plate on the table. Impossible, such a shabby thing! Ten thousand! Martinho choked on his drink and went into a paroxysm of coughing. Manuel looked back at him quickly. The old man was red in the face. His left hand was pressed against his chest. Finally he stopped coughing.

Manuel said, "I am grateful to you for pointing out these valuable objects. I plan to take several of them with me when I leave."

"To make my shooting seem the work of burglars? Art thieves?"

Andradas shrugged. "Why not?"

Martinho's thin face took on an expression of resignation. He rubbed a hand over his white hair. "In that case," he said wryly, "you'd better steal something that will make your stratagem credible." His lips curved in a half-smile. "I misled you about these objects on the patio. They're worthless."

"I suspected as much."

"Yes, trash. If you really want the authorities to believe I've been murdered by art thieves, you should steal my ear of corn."

"Ear of corn?" Manuel tried to conceal his bewilderment.

"The treasure of my collection. A solid gold, hand-carved ear of corn, the only extant fragment

of the famous golden cornfield planted by Inca goldsmiths in Cuzco's *Curi-canchi*, the Golden Enclosure, in the fifteenth century . . ." Martinho looked into the photographer's dull eyes, saw none of his own enthusiasm for Inca culture reflected there. "But never mind. The main thing is, my golden corn is literally priceless. Any collector, museum or dealer would give his soul to possess it."

Manuel said, "I don't doubt you, Senhor. Yet an ear of corn . . ."

Martinho stood up. "I'll show it to you," he said.

Manuel moved the gun muzzle a fraction of an inch. "Where is it?"

"In my study, through the doors there. I have never shown it to a stranger. But since I am to die, I would like to see it once more myself?" His voice rose at the end.

Manuel Andradas came to his feet like a cat. "I will be right behind you." What harm to indulge Martinho's whim? Besides, he was faintly curious about the ear of corn.

He followed Martinho across the patio and through the French doors into the collector's study, a large room lined with glass-fronted cases. On velvet-clad shelves inside the cases reposed the age-darkened objects that com-

prised Martinho's collection. Manuel gave them only a glance.

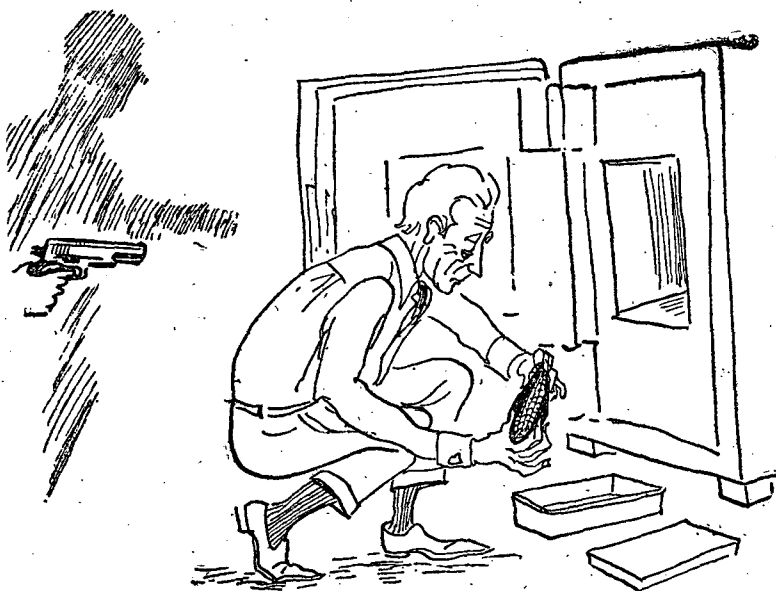
Martinho went directly to a waist-high steel safe of massive construction at one end of the room. Kneeling before it, he raised his eyes to the ceiling in momentary thought, then made mysterious movements with his hands before the safe door, above it, and on each side. "I keep the corn here," he said over his shoulder. "This is a truly burglar-proof safe. It operates on a complex system of electrical impulses, activated and interrupted at specific points and intervals. No one can open it except me and my

confidential secretary, you know."

The safe door whispered open. Martinho removed from it a cylindrical-shaped object encased in padded velvet. He squatted on his heels and held the velvet bundle up toward Manuel. "Here it is, Senhor Andradas. The ear of corn."

Manuel stepped back a pace. His gun was steady. "Unwrap it yourself," he said.

Martinho did so. He put the velvet case on the floor before the open safe, and laid the golden ear of corn upon it. "There," he said, in a voice so low Manuel could scarcely hear him, "is a finer piece



than Pizarro ever plundered!" His eyes rested reverently upon the corn. "Isn't it a marvel?" he asked. He took his packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one, inhaling luxuriously, waiting for the photographer's comment.

Manuel said, "Yes, it is handsome. To photograph it and get that exact sheen of ancient gold, the detail of each kernel of corn, would be . . ." He stopped. "Close the safe. Pick up the corn and bring it to the patio."

Martinho nodded. He pushed the door of the safe firmly shut, then picked up the ear of corn and preceded Manuel to the patio where he once more sank into his chaise. He set the golden relic on the table beside the pamphlet he had been reading.

Manuel resumed his chair. He said, "It is well-known that you own this unique ear of corn?"

"Certainly. It is the finest item I possess."

"Very well. I shall take it with me, as you suggest."

"For verisimilitude only, I warn you. You cannot sell it without giving yourself away as my murderer. It is too well known."

"I'll drop it off Sugar Loaf into the sea," Manuel said. "No one else shall own it. I promise you that." The gun came up. "Are you ready?"

"May I have a last cigarette? And a last look at my ear of corn?"

Out of respect for the old man's courage, Manuel said, "Go ahead."

"Can you give me a cigarette?"

"I don't smoke," Manuel answered. "I confine myself to cashew juice." Then, "But where are your own cigarettes? You had some in your shirt pocket."

Martinho said, "I locked those up in my safe just now."

"Why?"

"The packet of cigarettes contained my new Japanese camera," Martinho said. "The Banzai Miniature. It is advertised as no bigger than a cigarette. You know it?" His tone was bland.

"I know it. I prefer the Minox, however." Manuel paused. "It was in your packet of cigarettes?"

"It was in my left hand until I snapped your picture with it," said Martinho. "I choked on my drink to cover the sound of the shutter-click. Remember? Then I slipped the camera into my packet of cigarettes."

"You took a photograph of me?"

"Exactly. A medium close-up, I think, you call it. It should show your features and your gun very clearly."

Patiently Manuel said, "Let us not joke, Senhor. You are telling me you had a miniature camera in

your hand when I arrived here? That you took my photograph with it? That you then locked the camera in your burglar-proof safe?"

"A very *précise* summary."

"Of an excellent bluff only. Oh, I take your intention: to make me suppose that when your secretary opens your safe in the course of the police investigation of your murder, they find a camera in the safe instead of this precious ear of corn. They will develop the film in the camera and will thus be presented with a picture of your murderer . . . who can be readily identified by hundreds of people as Manuel Andradas, the photographer. Is that it?"

"Precisely. Your analysis is masterly."

"And your idea ingenious," Manuel said, "to lay a photographic trap for a photographer. I do not, however, believe you."

"Why not?" Martinho was relaxed, smiling a little.

"I have watched you every moment since I arrived. You couldn't have taken my picture."

"You looked at my Mochica vases, my Chimu-black-ware and my Inca dinner plate, did you not?"

Manuel, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe, said, "Perhaps, as you say. But that you had a min-

iature camera in your hand when I came upon you, that is stretching coincidence too far."

Martinho shrugged. "I do not usually lie yet I might, to save my life. Perhaps this will convince you?" He handed Manuel the pamphlet he had been reading when the photographer arrived upon his patio.

A single glance revealed it was an instruction manual on how to use the new Banzai Miniature Camera.

With the air of a man who has just lost a wager larger than he can afford to lose, Manuel put away his gun. "The police, I suppose?" he asked after a painful pause.

"Not necessarily. Another idea occurs to me." The creases in Martinho's face leading from nose to mouth corners momentarily deepened. "My nephew's perfidy in this affair concerns me far more than your own purely mechanical involvement, Senhor Andradas." Then he asked, "How do you get your assignments from the Corporation?"

"A jackal named Rodolfo—"

"No, no. Do they point out your victims to you in the flesh, I mean?"

"I get only a name and address from my contact. Correct identification is entirely up to me."

"In that case, the matter simpli-

fies itself, I think." Senhor Martinho nodded. "The name and address only, eh?"

"That's all."

"Then I suggest that what has happened, Senhor Andradas, is that you have made an unfortunate mistake in identification today. The right name, the right address, yes, but the wrong man. Do you see?"

Manuel shook his head. "I do not."

Martinho's faded blue eyes narrowed. "My nephew," he said softly, "happens to be my brother's son. His name is therefore Martinho, like mine. Luis Martinho, indeed, since he is my namesake."

"Ah." Manuel saw where the trail led now. "But the address, Senhor?"

Martinho waved a hand at a building beyond the lily pond. "That is my carriage house over there. I permit my nephew to live in it, rent-free. The same address, therefore, as mine."

Manuel remained silent.

Martinho said, "One does not arrange the sudden death of rich uncles with impunity, even in these corrupt days. My nephew must be taught a lesson."

After a moment Manuel said without inflection, "A permanent lesson, Senhor?"

"A permanent lesson, by all

means. Will you see to it, then?"

"When?"

"Tonight? He will be at home, I know. The servants will not return from their picnic before eleven."

"Where will you be?"

Martinho smiled. "Across the city, dining with friends, from eight until midnight."

"Very well," said Manuel. "*Va bem.*"

"Then that is settled."

"Except," said Manuel, "that the Corporation will withhold my money if I nullify the wrong man, especially their own client, and my reputation with them will no doubt suffer damage."

Martinho shrugged. "We must all pay for our mistakes—my nephew, you, I, everyone."

Manuel sighed. "I can think of no mistake that you have made, Senhor. For me, on the other hand, the day has been a disaster. I lose the money I was to earn for your removal. I am forced to nullify your nephew without recompense. I lose my anonymity as a Corporation employee. I, a professional photographer, am photographically tricked by an amateur. I also lose, I presume, this ear of golden corn."

"You do, indeed." Martinho picked up the corn and fondled it. "However, once you have taught

my nephew his lesson, I will give you the incriminating film."

Manuel stared. "Even though retaining it might prevent me from making another attempt on your life?"

"Even so. I'll guarantee to send the film, undeveloped, to your studio tomorrow—if you are successful tonight."

It was evident from the blankness of the photographer's eyes that he failed to comprehend this quixotic gesture. Martinho laughed. "You must understand that I bear you no ill will over this business. Instead, I'm grateful to you for opening my eyes to my own nephew's character. So I shall send you the film."

"*Obrigado*," murmured Manuel. "Thanks."

Martinho waved a hand at his vases, his black-ware, his ashtray. "When you leave, you may wish to take one of these antiquities with you," he said, "as a slight token of my appreciation." He rose, cradling his golden ear of corn in his hands as tenderly as one might

hold a baby bird with a broken wing. "I must say good-day to you now, Senhor Andradas. I tire rather easily these days. Thank you for relieving my tedium, however." He shook his head. "It is ironic that my nephew was so impatient. A few short weeks would have made all the difference to him."

"How so?" asked Manuel.

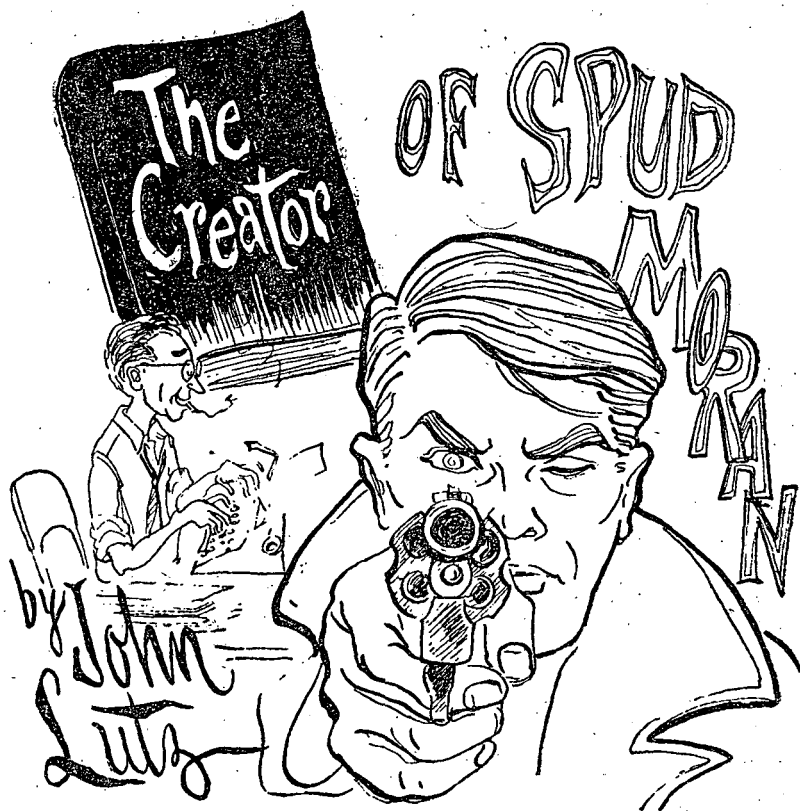
Martinho flashed him a brilliant smile. "My doctors assured me yesterday that I am incurably ill," he said. "They give me, at the most, two months to live."

The old man walked into the house. Manuel watched him, hitching the strap of his camera case to ease its weight on his shoulder. When Martinho was gone, he thoughtfully dumped into a handy flowerpot the cigarette stubs and powdered ashes from Martinho's polychrome ashtray. Then he slipped it into his pocket.

With a trickster like Senhor Martinho, one never knew what to believe. The ashtray just might be worth something.



An author, perhaps, may not be entirely immune to osmotic infection by his own creations.



SPUD MORAN was tough—iron-hard, gut-deep tough. He was merciless to his enemies, merciless to his friends and merciless to his women. Scruples were not for him; if a thing worked, it was justified. Toughness was his creed, his way of life and his stock in trade as a private investigator. Randall Morgan, the writer, the creator of Spud Moran, was not half that tough.

Randall Morgan stood in the brisk October breeze, watching the lighted windows of the plush white-brick motor hotel across the street. He was a small man, slender, unlike the granite physical specimen that was his literary creation. His thick glasses rested on a long nose that had never been broken, and thin hands that had never struck a blow in anger were jammed deep into his overcoat pockets. The blue eyes behind his thick glasses flickered interest as a dark sedan pulled out of the exit from the motel's parking garage. The sedan turned left beneath the red neon exit sign, made a neat U-turn and pulled to the curb alongside Randall.

Randall leaned over and rested his hands on the cold metal window ledge as the driver spoke.

"They're in there, Mr. Morgan. Room 27." The eyes of the real-life private investigator expressed no sympathy as he said this.

Randall bit his lower lip and his knuckles whitened against the dark car door. He could see that the detective was cold and wishing he could roll up the window.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Randall? You want photographs?"

Randall composed himself and shook his head. "No, no photographs."

"They'll have to walk by the lounge entrance when they leave," the detective said. "You can sit in there and see them for yourself if you want. They might stop in for a drink, so better sit back where they won't spot you. It's dark in there."

"I might just do that," Randall said.

The detective looked at him with a faintly puzzled and worried expression. "Mr. Morgan, don't do anything until you give it a lot of thought. I don't want to get involved, you know?"

"I know," Randall said. "Thank you for your services. Your check will be in the morning mail." He turned and walked across the street toward the motel entrance, hearing the detective's car pull away when he was stepping up on the opposite curb.

The lounge was dark. Imitation gaslights along the walls provided the only illumination, and they flickered in an oddly relaxing way. Randall slid into a booth near the back that afforded him a view of the hall to the lobby. An attractive girl took his order for a whiskey sour and he settled down to wait.

Half an hour later he saw them. They paused by the lounge entrance as if debating whether or not to enter. Cy Claxton had on a dark suit and tie and looked as

unrumpled and impeccably dressed as always. He was holding Randall's wife gently by the upper arm, as if eager to guide her into the lounge. Randall saw that Loreen had on her very flattering red dress and he noticed that her blonde hair was still tousled. He felt the hate and desire for vengeance flame up in him as he watched Claxton walk in with Loreen and usher her to a booth not twenty feet from his own.

They ordered their drinks and sat talking intimately. Randall felt a lump form in his throat. He decided to walk over to them, to say something casual so Claxton wouldn't know he was so upset. Randall stood, his drink in his hand, and moved toward them.

Loreen looked up at him twice, once with complete disbelief and then with something like panic. Claxton merely looked pained and drummed his fingertips once, loudly, on the table in an 'of all the luck!' gesture.

Randall tried to ask in an off-hand way if he could join them, but the lump in his throat seemed to swell, blocking his speech.

"Sit down," Claxton said.

Randall obeyed. Loreen looked at him with an infinitely pitying expression in her wide eyes, and yet at that moment Randall pitied

her. He still loved her; he would forgive her for anything; but the searing shame and hate he felt for Claxton was a different matter.

Loreen's lips parted and moved slowly, precisely. "I'm sorry, Randall."

"Not nearly so sorry as I am, darling."

She stood suddenly as her eyes brimmed with tears, then turned on her heel and walked quickly out of the lounge.

Claxton shrugged and smiled a humorless smile. "Well, I guess there's nothing for me to say except that I'm sorry too."

Randall looked with hate and some envy at the handsome, firm-jawed graying features of the man across the table. "I have decided to kill you, Claxton."

Claxton merely looked bored. "Oh, come now, Randall, over this? A woman?"

"Not a woman—my wife!"

"But they're all somebody's wife or sister, or even mother. I can understand your anger, Randall, but there really has been no harm done. Besides, it's not as if I'm a perfect stranger. Why, I negotiated the contract on your last book. Surely you saw that there was some attraction between Loreen and myself."

"When I hired a lawyer I didn't expect that my wife would be part



of the commission," Randall said.

Claxton looked impatient. "Grow up, Randall. Loreen's no fair maiden out of one of your corny novels!"

"Apparently not," Randall said, looking at the tablecloth.

"And if you ask me, it was pret-

ty sneaky of you to have us followed like criminals."

"Perhaps."

Claxton's mood softened. "Don't be too upset, Randall. If it hadn't been me with Loreen it would have been somebody else."

"Nevertheless," Randall said in a

level voice, leaning slightly forward over the table, "I'm going to kill *you*. I'm going to plot your murder as carefully as I'd plot one of my books."

"But how will that help you?" Claxton asked, obviously surprised by this display of cold-bloodedness.

"You wouldn't understand."

Claxton gulped the last of his drink. "Well, I'll have you to understand that if you try anything funny I'll go to the police!"

Randall smiled with the corners of his mouth. "If this came out in the open, that fancy law firm you belong to would drop the name of Claxton overnight, not to mention the disastrous effect on your marriage. Your career as the up and coming lawyer would be set back by years."

The truth of this made Claxton's eyes narrow. "Suppose I write a letter to be opened in the event of my death, naming you as my murderer?"

Randall shrugged. "That would make no difference. I'm clever enough to supply myself with an ironclad alibi." The hate welled up in him again. "As far as I'm concerned, Claxton, you're already dead."

"Spare me the corny Spud Moran dialogue, Randall."

"But I'm going to murder you

just as Spud Moran would," Randall said calmly.

Claxton dabbed at his lips with a napkin and checked it for lipstick as he stood. "With one major difference."

"What's that?"

"You're not Spud Moran."

As he drove toward home, Randall realized with a twinge of frustration that Claxton was right. He wasn't Spud Moran. Planning a murder or some piece of clever illegality in a book was one thing, but it was something else altogether when Randall knew *he* had to carry out that plan. Spud Moran often went outside the law to solve his cases or avenge his clients, and though Randall could concoct such devilish schemes, he knew he simply didn't have the will or the cool abandon to execute them.

When he entered the house he found Loreen in the livingroom. Her bags were packed and she was waiting for a cab.

Randall didn't speak to her as he hung his coat in the closet. She was sitting on the sofa with her head bowed when he turned around.

"You really don't have to leave, you know," he said.

She answered softly. "I do, Randall."

"I don't want you to." His voice

broke with emotion. "I could forgive you for far more than you've done, Loreen."

She stood and paced hurriedly to the door and back, as if anxious for the cab to arrive. "I know you'd forgive me, Randall. It isn't that."

He held out his hands. "Then what?"

"It's Cy Claxton." She met his eyes firmly with her own. "I'm afraid we're in love." Quickly the eyes were averted.

"You're going to him?"

"I know he's married," she said defensively. "He'll get a divorce. It's all arranged. I'll stay at a hotel until he tells his wife about us."

"How many women do you think Claxton has told that to?" Randall asked angrily.

Loreen flushed.

"Don't you realize—"

A horn honked outside. "I'm sorry, Randall." And she was gone.

Randall stood stunned, staring at the closed door. After a while he went to the kitchen and poured himself a drink. The warmth of the liquor added to the fire of his hate for Claxton.

Late that night Randall was lying awake in his bed, still turning over possibilities of murdering Claxton. He was getting nowhere. It was *not* like plotting a mystery novel. Try as he would, he couldn't

put himself in Spud Moran's shoes and think like a hardboiled, merciless private detective. This was life—Randall Morgan's life—and he wasn't Spud Moran except within the pages of his novels.

Then, realizing what he could do, he climbed out of bed quickly and went to his typewriter. He had told Claxton he'd plot his murder just like a mystery novel, and that's exactly what he'd do. Instantly his mind came up with a good working title and he rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter. His fingers found the keyboard and began to dance over the keys.

MORAN'S REVENGE

Spud Moran stood in the brisk October air and watched the plush motor hotel across the street, waiting for his man to report to him. As he watched, a dark sedan pulled out of the garage exit, made a neat U-turn and pulled up alongside him.

The man rolled down the window and looked up at Moran with something like fear. "They're in there, Mr. Moran. Room 27."

Moran placed his hands on the car door and leaned down. "You better be damned positive . . ."

Within two weeks Randall saw that it was shaping up to be one of the better Spud Moran adventures. It was a pity that it could never be published, but then it

would reap Randall a different kind of reward—a payment of revenge, with residuals of deep satisfaction.

Though Randall Morgan was a compassionate man, Spud Moran was not. He liked to bait his intended victims, to make them squirm on the hook. The reader found this rather enjoyable because, like Claxton, the victims of Moran's wrath always deserved just that fate. By chapter three, Moran had Claymont, the man who had kidnapped his new bride, backed into an inescapable corner and was antagonizing him with shocking, threatening telephone calls.

Randall was breathing hard into the receiver as he listened to the ringing on the other end of the line. There was a click, then Claxton's confident, "Hello."

"Cy Claxton?"

"Yes."

"I bet your wife won't be able to identify you at the morgue."

"What? Who is this?"

"There might not even be enough left to perform an autopsy."

A long silence. "Is this you, Randall?"

"It might be."

"Now listen—"

Randall set the receiver in its cradle.

In chapter five, Spud Moran used the U. S. mail to make his intended victim suffer, and so did Randall Morgan. Cy Claxton began receiving newspapers in the mail, with his penciled, neatly printed name inserted alphabetically in the obituary column.

A week after Claxton stopped receiving mail at home and rented a post office box, Randall began to follow him constantly, purposely letting Claxton catch sight of him now and then. The results pleased Randall. They were almost exactly the results that Spud Moran got with Claymont in the novel. Randall's quarry, Claxton, lost weight, developed circles under his eyes as if he weren't sleeping nights, and his movements became quicker and more nervous almost daily. There was no doubt he was taking Randall quite seriously by now.

The time came when Randall decided that Claxton had suffered enough—enough for Randall, that is—for Randall was eager now to let the ax fall. He began to consider various ways of ending the novel.

Spud Moran's and Randall Morgan's problems were, of course, solved simultaneously. Cy Claxton had a cottage up in the hills, a secluded place in the woods where he spent a few days every late November during deer season while he hunted. With the guile and un-

compromising hardness of Spud Moran, Randall built his plan around that yearly hunting trip. It would be perfect for the final chapter.

Of course Claxton would never spend a weekend alone in the woods under the present circumstances, but that posed no problem to Randall. No one really knew the present circumstances except himself and Claxton, and even if anyone did, Randall would have his alibi.

Randall decided to stay up late that night and finish the first draft—the last draft—of the novel. The small details of his plan would come to him as he wrote. Besides, it went against his professional grain not to complete what he started. When he was finished he would burn the manuscript carefully in the incinerator. Randall sat down at his typewriter and began:

Spud Moran chose a night during the two week deer season when he knew Claymont would be home alone. He watched fear blanch Claymont's handsome features as he opened the door and saw the revolver.

"Inside!" Moran said with a tight smile.

The door was shut behind them. The house was deathly quiet.

"Please, Moran! I'll do anything . . ."

"What you'll do," Moran said with a vicious chuckle, "is write a note tellin' your wife you drove up to your cabin to get in a little huntin'. Then we'll go upstairs and you'll get dressed in your huntin' garb." The revolver hammer eased backward under Moran's heavy thumb. "Cooperate an' it might buy you a little more life."

Cy Claxton stood awkwardly in his bedroom, sweat pouring off his florid face as he finished buttoning his heavy red-checked mackinaw. He was also wearing thick corduroy pants and high leather boots. Randall could see that he didn't know whether to be afraid or furious.

"You must be insane to think you can do this, Randall!" The voice was a bit choked.

Randall steadied the small but deadly revolver. "Not at all. I think I have about a ninety-five percent chance; and even if I'm caught and found guilty, as a lawyer you should know there's no death penalty in this state. In ten years I'd be eligible for parole, and frankly, Claxton, I think killing you would be worth ten years of my life." Randall picked up Claxton's empty rifle and a box of shells. "Time to go," he said firmly, in the best Spud Moran manner.

They walked downstairs, into

the garage and got into Claxton's car. Claxton sat in the driver's seat with the revolver barrel stuck in his ribs.

"To the cabin, I take it," he said through clenched teeth.

"No," Randall said, "to my place."

"Your place?"

"You're going to be my guest, Claxton. You and I both know your wife won't be alarmed if you disappear for a few days and, for once, she'll be wrong about where you are."

The gun barrel prodded, and Claxton started the engine.

Randall's home stood in the middle of a five acre tract, well out of sight of the nearest neighbor. Randall had Claxton lean against the inside garage wall. Then he put the revolver in his pocket and from a shelf took down a hunting rifle with a soft pillow tied around the end of its barrel. It was an imported war surplus rifle that he'd bought across the state line—a virtually untraceable rifle. He marched Claxton to the back of the house.

They stopped and Randall began to walk backward away from Claxton, one careful step at a time. Claxton was standing before a large plastic sheet that was staked out on the hard, cold November ground. Randall stood still when

he was about twenty feet from Claxton and raised the rifle to his shoulder.

Randall was amazed as he sighted at Claxton through the fold of the pillow. For the first time that evening Claxton did not appear afraid.

"The moment of truth," he said, smiling grimly at Randall. "And you know what, Randall, you're not nearly man enough to go through with it."

Randall felt his body begin to tremble and he swallowed, struggling to hold the rifle steady. He abhorred killing anything, even smashing a bug, but killing Claxton was a different matter. Spud Moran wouldn't have hesitated; Randall didn't hesitate. He saw the hole appear in the front of the heavy mackinaw as Claxton's body pitched backward.

The rifle and bullet had been bought carefully, so that there would be a minimum of bleeding. The thick mackinaw soaked up most of what blood there was and it congealed quickly in the cold. Within ten minutes Randall had the body wrapped in the plastic sheet and lying behind the bushes by the house, where it would remain for two days. Then, marveling at his calmness, he went inside, cleaned up and decided to visit some friends. It was time to start

establishing that planned alibi.

Late in the afternoon of the second day after he'd killed Claxton, Randall began the final phase of his plan. The first thing he did was feed poison to the two squirrels he'd bought at a pet shop the week before. When they were dead he picked them up carefully and distastefully with gloved hands and placed them in a paper bag. He put the bag in Claxton's car, then opened the rear door of the garage and wrestled Claxton's body into the trunk of the car. Then he went into the house and got dressed in the hunting clothes he'd purchased. Armed with his new shotgun, he went back to the garage and drove the car outside.

The series of minimum risks was now beginning. It would be mere chance if a neighbor were driving past and saw Claxton's car pull out of Randall's driveway, or think anything of it if he did, but it was still best to be careful. Randall waited and listened in the cold silence until he was sure he couldn't hear the distant whir of automobile tires, then he drove quickly out into the street and turned toward the highway.

Two and a half hours later Randall drove past the rented car he'd left parked inconspicuously in the lot of a busy all-night diner. The turnoff to Claxton's cabin was a

mile away, the cabin another mile and a half up the turnoff. It was a good forty-five minute walk between the cabin and the diner.

Randall drove up the secluded dirt road to the cabin and parked the car. He worked quickly, with nervous efficiency, as Spud Moran would have worked. After opening the cabin door with Claxton's keys and moving things around inside to make it appear that Claxton had at least been there before hunting, Randall immediately went back to the car and removed the body from the trunk. He tucked the bag with the two dead squirrels in his belt, hoisted Claxton's body up on his shoulders, and with his burden of death began walking over the cold-hardened ground toward the edge of the woods. As he had figured, footprints would be no problem.

Randall walked for perhaps twenty minutes before laying down the body and leaning against a tree with a weary sigh of relief. But he didn't rest for long. He unwrapped Claxton from the plastic sheet and stretched him out on the dry leaves in roughly the same position in which he'd fallen when shot in Randall's back yard. He slipped Claxton's keys back into the dead man's pocket, placed the unfired deer rifle by the body and folded the plastic sheet. Then he

made sure there were no visible signs of his presence and walked quickly away. If Claxton's corpse were found the next day, the medical examiner would state that he'd been shot three days ago, and during that period Randall could completely account for his time. It would officially be one of those too-frequent, undiscovered accidents that were bound to happen when men hunted with rifles that fired bullets a mile.

When he thought he was far enough from the body, Randall took the two dead squirrels from the bag. With his usual abhorrence for blood and violence, he laid them on the ground and fired two shots from his shotgun. He crumpled the paper bag and threw it away, then wrapped the bloody squirrels in the plastic sheet. This would explain the bloody plastic if he was seen or stopped in the rented car. He would be just another hunter returning home after the weekend.

Randall reached the car in the diner's lot and slumped wearily in the front seat. He wanted very much to go inside and get a revitalizing cup of coffee, but he knew he should get back to the city as soon as possible. Sighing, he shut the car door and fitted the key in the ignition. It was over. Spud Moran would have been

proud! He had carried it off!

The rap on the closed window came at the same time as the voice. "Hold on there, mister, I wanna see your license."

Startled, Randall looked up to see a big man with some kind of a badge on his fleece-collared coat. From inside the diner, he must have seen Randall walk onto the lot.

Randall rolled down the window, his throat dry. The last thing he could afford was a traffic ticket or court summons that would prove his presence in the area of Claxton's death. He stammered at the man, his heart pounding emotion into the words, "What's the trouble, officer? I-I'm not illegally parked!"

The man's ruddy face was impassive. "Your license please, mister."

With a pang of fear Randall handed over his driver's license. It might still work out all right if he could escape without a ticket or a written summons.

"It's not your driver's license I want," the big man said, his eyes roaming over the shotgun and the plastic-wrapped squirrels on the floor of the car. "I want to see your hunting license."

Randall's body shook with fear and a sinking sensation as he tried to offer an excuse, to tell the man

that he'd just forgotten his license, but he couldn't get the words out. It didn't matter.

"You're in big trouble, mister. Squirrels are out of season."

The trial was a terrible ordeal. Under the merciless pounding of the prosecutor's questions, the unfathomable stare of Loreen's steady eyes, the grief-stricken, agonized glances of Claxton's widow, Randall broke. Any man would have broken. Spud Moran would have broken!

Randall overturned the table where he and his lawyer sat, he screamed at the jury, he screamed at the judge, he had to be restrained by six uniformed officers who led him screaming and snarling from the courtroom so the trial could continue.

Guilty! It was what Randall had expected if he were caught—but one thing didn't go as expected. He was resigned to the idea of spending much of his future in prison, but he didn't think they'd send him here, to this place of smiles and endless hours, where pardon from a life sentence was impossible.

He looked up from the stack of white papers he'd been laboriously penciling and laid them next to him on the sun-warmed concrete bench. Loreen, accompanied by a

tall, uniformed attendant, was coming toward him down the long walk on the other side of the chain-link fence. When they reached the fence the attendant whispered something in her ear and left. Randall rose and walked over to her, lacing his fingers through the fence and leaning on it.

Loreen looked very uncomfortable. "I—I thought that I should come and talk to you Randall," she said slowly, in her deliberate manner.

He gazed down at her. "Randall?" he said, and shook the fence with clenched fingers.

Loreen took an alarmed step backward, her expression strangely bewildered.

Randall continued to shake the fence violently, screaming, "*The name's Moran, lady—Spud Moran! Jus' stay away from me, hear? Stay away or I'll bust outa here an' crack your head wide open!*"

The attendant appeared out of nowhere to usher her away, and Randall stood watching Loreen's receding figure as they went slowly up the long walk. Then he turned and went back to the bench, to the papers he'd been working on, the book he was writing about a cultured gentleman named Randall Morgan who sets out to commit a murder.

Even at solitaire, one doesn't always win.



IN Mrs. Ellis' bedroom Arthur had first investigated the shelves and drawers. He did this with a caution and finesse based upon experience, lifting folded garments deftly, probing beneath, and then restoring them to their original

him in the doorway, blocking it.

"I see," she said. Her tone was a mixture of anger and contempt. "I trusted you. I might have known. Your kind is never any good." She walked toward the phone.

Nobody

To



With

positions. Boxes were opened, searched, then carefully closed. Arthur had known women to secrete their valuables in the most unlikely places. The jewel box remained but it was locked. He examined it, tested the strength of the lock, and considered. He might be able to force it with a nail file and leave no traces. Bent over the box, the file ready, he had an uneasy sensation. He straightened slowly, then whirled when he heard the creaking noise. Mrs. Ellis stood behind

"What are you going to do?" Arthur hadn't expected her to return until late that evening. His question was mechanical; he already knew the answer, but he believed that he also knew women of Mrs. Ellis' social status. When she raised the phone, he said, "If you call the police there'll be a scandal. Is that what you want?"

He felt confident. Similar scenes had been enacted in the past, the same tactics used and danger had been averted.

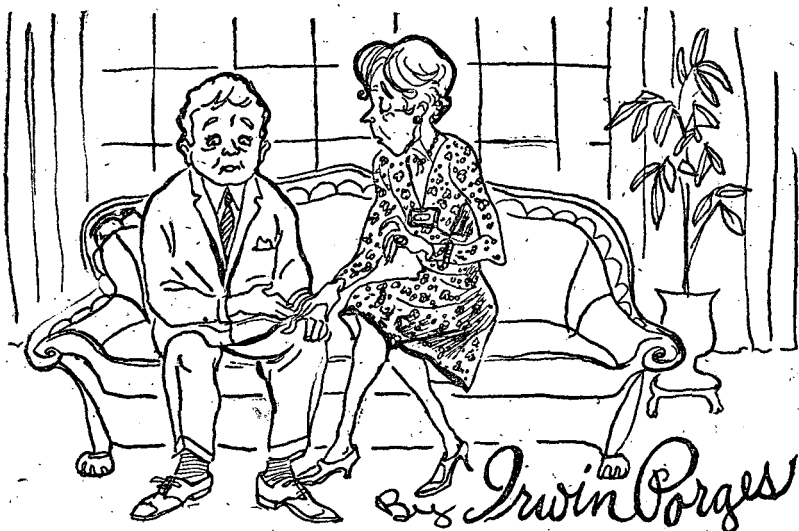
Her eyes were coldly amused. "That's your trump card, I suppose. Well, this time it won't work. My social connections are practically nonexistent, and I'm past the age where scandal means anything to me." She began to dial.

Arthur moved closer to her. "You'd better not."

"Why?" She spoke without

cried once and crumpled to the floor.

He knelt to gaze at the woman and listen for sounds of breathing. There were none. He stood, his fingers still curled about the statuette. Replacing it on the table, he took his handkerchief and rubbed it thoroughly over the metal surface. While doing this, he looked down at the woman. "Stupid fool!" he said, his voice vibrating with anger. "You made me do it."



glancing up at him. "Do you think you can frighten me?"

His hand groped behind him for the metal statuette. Gripping it, he swung suddenly. She tried to raise an arm to block the descending figure, but she was too late. She

He shrugged and began to consider his next steps. The murder was regrettable. He would have preferred that it hadn't happened, but he had no fear. He and the woman were the only ones in the house. She meant nothing to him,

as did none of the middle-aged and elderly women he cultivated. He had picked up Mrs. Ellis at a theater several weeks earlier, or it might be said that she had picked him up.

Women, usually widows, divorcees or lonely spinsters, were Arthur's source of livelihood. To a number of them, he had an irresistible appeal. He was not the ordinary type of gigolo who offered accommodation to older women in exchange for money, maintenance and expensive gifts. In fact, Arthur bore no resemblance to the stereotype of the Latin professional lover. He was neither sleek nor dark, wasn't suave, and didn't have glossy black hair or long sideburns. At twenty-five Arthur was small and chubby, only five feet four, with a clear pink complexion and round cheeks. Appearing no more than eighteen or nineteen, he had an aura of innocence, of naivete, which women found charming. He was quite aware of his double attraction, or more accurately of the lure of the two techniques he used so efficiently. For the women who did not respond to the obvious advances, he assumed his act of youthful helplessness, of a need for advice and protection. The women's motherly instincts were at once aroused.

Arthur spent the next fifteen

minutes ransacking the house, then filled a cardboard box with valuable bric-a-brac, carried it down to the garage where his car was parked, and placed the items in his trunk. A second load and trip to the garage were required before he was satisfied that he'd taken everything of value. He drove away, certain that nobody had seen him with the woman and that there was no way of tracing him.

As he drove, Arthur reflected about the past few weeks with Mrs. Ellis. The relationship had not been very satisfactory, the woman not very generous. She'd really been quite stingy, he recalled. He felt a surge of resentment. Considering the intimacy of their association, she should have been willing to give him some jewelry as a gift. Other women had done this. Previously, only once in his career had his violence brought a serious aftermath. Several years before there'd been a liaison with a Mrs. Howard—what was her full name, Frances Howard? He had appraised her shrewdly as a woman with a dominating maternal drive and his favorite story, used so often that he had memorized the lines, affected her powerfully.

"Lonely," he said, his voice maneuvered into a boyish pitch. "An only child is a lonely child. You have no idea." He stared blandly

beyond her, like one resurrecting ghosts of the past. "I can still see myself . . ." He understood the effect of halting fragments of speech. "... sitting on the old wooden steps of the front porch . . . gazing wistfully out . . . really hopelessly . . . never any friends, any playmates . . . nobody, nobody to play with . . . Mother tried, but she was alone . . . and when she died. . ." His voice faded and he made a sudden motion as though jerked back to the present.

The impact upon Mrs. Howard had been greater than he had imagined. With tears in her eyes, she squeezed his hand and the association was launched. She lived alone and welcomed him into her home, pampering him and buying him expensive gifts. The situation seemed ideal, destined to last longer than the others, but as with all of Arthur's alliances, the arguments soon began. The crisis came one evening with a most violent quarrel. A gold watch and an antique vase had vanished. She accused him of taking them. He blustered, shouted, and then in a rage, struck her. She fell heavily, striking her head against the corner of the brick fireplace. He fled, and learned from the papers that she had a skull fracture and was on the critical list. Fortunately, she

lived, and the press forgot about it.

Arthur had traveled about in fear and apprehension for weeks, believing she had informed the police and that he was a wanted man. When nothing happened he realized she hadn't talked, and in the passing months he understood that the other middle-aged women could be depended upon to react the same way. He could pursue his activities with little danger. After the affair was over, they were too ashamed—too afraid of scandal and publicity—to chance any public revelations. Since Mrs. Howard, Arthur had threatened and struck a number of women, especially when they were tired of him and he was tired of them.

Now, with no particular destination or plan, Arthur's only precaution was to place as much distance as possible between himself and the Ellis home. The body would be discovered, investigations would follow and, although he was perfectly safe, there was no sense in taking chances. He drove at a leisurely pace, heading westward, and arrived in Los Angeles a few days later. He'd been in the City of Angels before so he knew of a number of small comfortable hotels, residential in nature, where well-to-do women preferred to stay. The clerk at the Wentworth Hotel watched curiously while Ar-

thur registered. Clearly, he was wondering why a young man would choose a quiet, sedate hotel of this type.

"Not much doing here," he said, taking the card and reading the name. "Arthur Lynn, is that it?"

"Yes." Arthur had turned to gaze about the lobby, noting a lounge on one side and a writing room on the other. "That's what I had in mind," he said. "I just wanted to relax for a while, take things easy."

The clerk's face had a gloomy expression. "If you stay around here you'll get plenty of *that*. Most of these women are upstairs and in bed by ten o'clock."

After dinner Arthur struck up an acquaintance with Mrs. Dahl, a plump, pleasant woman in her fifties. After venturing some flattering remarks about her youthful appearance, he observed a speculative light in her eyes, a light he had detected in his encounters with other women. It signified that he had stirred her interest, but shortly afterward the woman's son arrived to take her visiting. Surly and suspicious, he examined Arthur with an unconcealed hostility. Through past experience Arthur had long ago established an inviolable rule: never form relationships with women who have nearby relatives or close attach-

ments. Any designs toward Mrs. Dahl would have to be abandoned.

For several evenings he sat around the lounge or writing room, chatting with a number of women, making acquaintances without any effort at following them up. Nothing appeared very promising until he was introduced to Mrs. Engleman. He had been aware of her glances from the corner where she usually sat, and had noticed that her smile seemed warm and approving. Her appearance was not impressive. She was an elderly woman, thin and rather bony, with unattractive features. However, she was well dressed, and he caught the gleam of an expensive looking ring and of a jeweled bracelet that clasped her arm.

By the end of the evening they were sitting on a divan together, with Arthur devoting all his attention to her, and she made casual references to her family background. "Engleman," she said. "We're practically pioneers in Los Angeles. Everybody knows the name."

Arthur didn't know the name but there was a sense of familiarity about it. Had he read something in a newspaper or magazine? It was worth investigating. The woman's hints created an enticing possibility—she might be comfort-

ably fixed, with both money and property—and she seemed to be alone.)

Arthur met Mrs. Engleman again the next evening in the lounge, after his research in a library. She seemed happy to see him and eager to talk, almost as though she had been waiting for him. He began with oblique attempts to draw her out, but these were hardly necessary. She spoke freely about her family and past happenings. Her grandfather had come to Los Angeles in the 1900's and purchased a tract of land that was now near the downtown area. Her husband, a wealthy realtor, had died five years ago.

"Your children?" Arthur asked.

She shook her head. "There are none. We had a son . . ." She broke off and her face had a tortured look. Then she smiled at him. "I try not to live in the past."

"There was something about your estate," he said. "I believe I read it in the papers."

"Oh, yes." Her chin had a determined set. "The city would like to buy it for a park, but I have no intention of selling. The council even threatened condemnation. I suppose I'm being silly, but I'm keeping it for purely sentimental reasons. I have no need for money. My husband left me more than I'll ever use."

"But you live here at the hotel," said Arthur. "I don't understand—"

"You would if you saw the place and the grounds," she said. "It's enormous. What would I do there by myself? I'd be like a pea rattling around in a huge shell. I've closed it, but I go there to check on things once or twice a week." She was gazing at him in a friendly way. "I should be ashamed. Here I've been rambling on about myself all this time, and I don't know anything about you or your family. You must tell me everything."

While she'd talked, Arthur had been reflecting. Past disappointments had given him a strong sense of caution, but he had to concede that he'd never encountered a more hopeful situation. It was difficult to control a feeling of excitement. Even the question of the best approach seemed answered. Obviously, she was drawn to him, but her interest couldn't be romantic—she wasn't the type. The clue had come from her reference to a son and her tragic attitude. Mrs. Engleman's need was maternal—she wanted someone to mother.

Arthur began to play his cards skillfully. The story of his early home life, of a brutal drunken father who came home to strike

him and beat his mother, and of his mother's wasting away—these were spur-of-the-moment improvisations, but in all his career he had never staged a better performance. She leaned toward him, listening, her eyes wide and moist. He stared into the distance, summoning the agonies of his childhood, and slipped into his most tremulous story: "Lonely . . . an only child is a lonely child . . . sitting on the old wooden steps . . . hopeless . . . no friends . . . nobody . . . nobody to play with . . ."

When he finished, allowed for the appropriate minute of silence, and then stirred himself suddenly to return to the world of the present, he could see she was deeply touched. "How terrible," she murmured. "How terrible." He caught the quiver of her throat. She was silent, her gaze intense, as though too overcome to resort to further words.

By the next day, when she brought up the matter of paying a visit to the estate, it seemed only natural that he should hint at a willingness to accompany her. They drove to the area north of the downtown district, a neighborhood that once consisted of large two-story homes with broad, sweeping lawns in front and enormous orchard-like yards in the

fear. Some of these still remained, converted into rooming houses, but most had vanished, to be replaced by tiny box-like residences.

She directed him first to follow the outside road that wound about the estate. She pointed and waved to show him the boundaries. Enclosed by a high iron fence and tall hedges, the estate seemed to extend for acres. They parked in the circular driveway, and at the entrance she produced a key ring to open the heavy padlock of the gate.

As they climbed the stairs to the house, she said, "The place will seem sort of hollow and even ghostly. Whatever is left has been covered with sheets."

Inside she opened several windows to allow the light to stream in. The large rooms had an empty appearance. "Much of the stuff has been stored in other buildings," she said. While they walked through the house she commented about a number of objects. She nodded carelessly toward a Chinese vase. "It's a Ming and quite valuable. I should store it in the building in back of the house—most of the valuable items are stored there—but somehow I don't care to bother. Material things have no value to me anymore." She sighed. "Since the tragedy and the closing of the house, I've really

had no interests, no pursuits to—" tend to a business matter. Her next

"Yes, of course," said Arthur. visit to the house would not be for
"I understand." a few days, and he was certain he

"I honestly haven't the faintest could do his investigating without
idea of what's left in the house," any chance of interruption. Actu-
she said, "and what I've stored ally, Arthur planned to be quite
away in the back. One of these circumspect. The relationship with
days I must take inventory." She Mrs. Engleman was progressing
showed him a jade statue and a well and he had no intention of
painting by Monet. doing anything to jeopardize it.

When they were leaving he True, she had no idea of the exact
watched her take the keys from possessions that were lying about
the table where she had thrown the house, and would undoubtedly
them. "There are all kinds of keys never miss any small item he
around here," she said. "I've lost might filch but, tempting as it was,
track of them too." She pulled there was little sense in pilfering
open a drawer of the table. at this stage, when she might soon
"There's an extra set of keys in be giving him valuable presents.
here someplace." Yet he must satisfy his curiosity

about the building in the back and
its contents.

Once inside the house, he moved
through it very quickly to the
kitchen where the back door
opened to a long flight of stairs.
From the foot of the stairs a path
led toward a small stucco build-
ing. As he drew near it, he
noticed that the windows were
covered with heavy iron grilles.
Several appeared to be fixed per-
manently so that they remained
partially open. He tried to peer
inside but could see nothing ex-
cept the vague shapes of furniture.

Adjoining the front door he found
another small window, open at
the bottom. He began trying the

keys on the ring, choosing those that seemed likely to fit. It wasn't until the fourth try that the key slipped into the lock. He turned the knob slowly, leaving the keys dangling. With the door half-open, the light cut through the semi-darkness of the room.

He had just begun to look around when he heard a faint sound behind him. The door had closed and he turned to tug at the knob. He was locked in. Then he heard a woman's laugh.

Mrs. Engelman spoke to him from the front window. "I knew you would take the bait. You couldn't wait to get over here, could you?"

He went to the window and could see her standing there. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Why have you locked me in here?"

"Of course I was certain you'd remember where the keys were," she said. "Then today, when you said something about business, I knew you were coming here."

"All right," he said sullenly. "I was curious and came here to look. I wouldn't have taken anything. I didn't take anything from the house, did I? Now are you going to open the door?"

She appeared not to have heard him. "There was a woman—I know there've been many of them

in your life so perhaps you don't even remember the name—Frances Howard. You struck her. She was badly injured. In fact, she never fully recovered—has become a permanent invalid." She moved closer to press her face against the bars. "Frances is my sister. I've been looking for you for a long time. I vowed that if I caught you, the punishment would be short and sudden, but now I have something else in mind, something that's really more appropriate."

She moved away from the bars and he had no idea what she was doing until he heard the click of a switch from outside. Then the room was brightly illumined. He looked about. It was a large room with just a few chairs and a table. The walls were gaily decorated with animals and children. The floor was of some rubberized material.

Returning, she laughed again. "Odd, isn't it? It's a child's playroom. The cupboard on the side is filled with toys. Do you know I wasn't certain it was you until you told me that pathetic story of yours. Frances had mentioned it to me."

Arthur, angry, began to shout. "Let me out of here. You're going to be in serious trouble if you don't."

"It's no use your getting ex-

cited," she said. "There's something important you must know. I confess that I told you a big lie. I made you think my son was dead—but, he isn't. He's right there in the building with you."

Arthur started and stared nervously around.

"Oh, you needn't worry. He's in the living quarters in the rear. I must tell you about him, before I press a button to open the door that will let him in. I've taken care of him all his life. He's now about your age, I'd imagine—twenty-five? I was advised to put him in an institution but I couldn't bear the thought. He's retarded and his actions are, shall we say, a little unpredictable at times? But I don't think you need be concerned about violence. He's usually quite docile—unless he's upset or frustrated."

Arthur had thrust his hands through the window opening and his fingers scratched at the bars. "Let me out," he implored. "Let me out."

"You're not listening," she said, "and this is especially important. Be friendly. Don't do anything to antagonize him."

The door at the other end of the room slid open, and the heavy, ungainly man shuffled into the room. He stood silent, his eyes wide and fearful. He took a step

toward Arthur, then moved back hurriedly. His forehead wrinkled as he studied Arthur. Suddenly his face lit up. He went to the cupboard, opened it and pulled out a large rubber ball. He began to chuckle and jump up and down.

"Play," he said. "Play." He bounced the ball awkwardly toward Arthur who allowed it to go past him.

The man ran to pick it up. He faced Arthur and made a growling noise. "Play," he ordered gruffly, and bounced the ball again.

Arthur caught it and returned it. Mrs. Engleman's voice sounded cheerfully from the window. "He may overdo it at first, but he'll get tired after a while. Within a few weeks I imagine you two will adjust to each other. My son's been terribly lonesome. Remember, he too is an only child. He's never had anybody to play with."

Shortly, the City Council received a very firm letter from Mrs. Engleman indicating she would never sell the estate. If they attempted condemnation proceedings, she assured them that her lawyers would fight the case, if necessary, to the Supreme Court. Under those circumstances, the Council voted unanimously to abandon the entire project—and the Engleman estate remained a private playground.

As Bacon was wont to quote, "Stay a while, that we may make an end the sooner."



DR. PHILIP HOLLAND stood by his office window peering down through the late-afternoon haze at the parking lot across the street. Except for the muffled roar of im-

patient, homeward-bound traffic four floors below, the room was silent. Finally the doctor spotted what he'd been waiting for, Harry Thurber's long, sleek convertible pulling into the lot. He watched Thurber slip from behind the wheel, accept his ticket from the attendant, and make his way to-

ward the nearest pedestrian crossing.

Holland turned and took a seat behind his desk. Life is like a big dice game, he muttered to himself. Fate makes the throws and some men win and some men lose; but even the luckiest of them, like the man coming up to see him now, crap out once in a while. For more years than he cared to remember, Holland had been envious of Thurber; of his good looks, his free and easy way with women, and especially his money. Now that was changed. He wouldn't trade places with his old schoolmate for anything in the world.

Removing his rimless glasses from his pale blue eyes, he wiped them vigorously with a handker-



chief, then replaced them on his thin nose. He was nervously shuffling the papers around on his desk when he heard his patient in the outer office, and Miss Graham telling him to go right on in. The moment he'd been waiting for was here; but even though you despise him, how do you go about telling

a man you've known since childhood that he has only three months to live?

Harry Thurber was a man in his late thirties, about Holland's age, but he looked ten years older. The lines of dissipation that aged his handsome, sun-tanned face were honestly earned; the doctor knew that to be a fact. Thurber hesitated in the doorway, a slightly overweight figure in his two-hundred-dollar suit, spinning a thirty-dollar hat in his chubby, well-cared-for hands.

Dr. Holland pushed his chair back and rose halfway to his feet. "Come in, Harry," he said. "Come on in and have a seat." He pointed to a chair that faced the window and the fading light. "How are you?"

"That's what I've come to find out from you, Doc," Thurber quipped. He eyed the neat pile of folders and large manila envelopes on Holland's desk, then glanced up at the serious expression on the doctor's face. His tone changed. "You've got all the reports back, I suppose?"

"Yes, they're all here." Holland's voice was flat.

"And they're not good; is that what you're going to tell me?"

The doctor got to his feet and walked around his chair. At the window he stopped, keeping his

face averted, his arms folded.

"You want the truth, Harry?" he asked. "Is that right?"

Thurber twisted his hat a little faster, and Holland heard him swallow. "Why, yes. Yes, of course I do."

"The diagnosis is bad, really bad. In fact, I don't see how it could be much worse."

"And the X-rays?"

"They only confirm what the tests show. If you'd have come to me earlier, perhaps I could have—"

"There's no chance of a mistake? Maybe the wrong name on a laboratory report—" Thurber was grasping at straws now.

Holland shook his head. "I only wish there were, but I'm afraid there's no chance of that. But you certainly have a right to another doctor's opinion. I wouldn't blame you, not a bit."

His patient seemed to retreat farther into the chair. Somehow he appeared to be a much smaller man than the one who had entered the office only a few minutes ago. "No," Thurber said, "I don't want that. You've been my doctor for too many years. Besides, I wouldn't want to go through all this again."

Thurber fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, then took the light Holland offered. "Tell me, Phil, how much time do I have?"

Holland dropped the lighter back on the desk and looked his patient in the eye. "I'm sorry," he said. "Three months. Four at the outside."

"Three months!" Thurber started to climb out of his chair, and Holland saw the man's knees were shaking.

"Don't go, not just yet. Let's sit and talk a little while. How about breaking the news to your wife—I suppose you'll want to tell Janet right away?"

"Tell Janet!" Thurber's tone was bitter. "I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing she was going to be a widow soon. She'd probably laugh right in my face!"

"Laugh? What do you mean? I always thought you two—"

"Of course you did. Everybody thinks we're a happy married pair, but nobody knows the real situation. The Lord knows I've bent over backwards to keep it from our friends."

"What situation? What do you mean?"

Thurber ground out his half-smoked cigarette. A flood of anger clouded his face, erasing the self-pity that had been there a moment earlier. "Janet hasn't been my wife, not *really* my wife, for almost a year and a half."

"But you've only been married a couple of years."

"Yeah, that's right. Only a few months after we were married Janet got wind of a little affair I was having on the side. You know how I've always been."

Holland nodded, but kept his eyes on a spot on the far wall. He knew how Thurber had always been, all right. Ever since their high school days he'd watched his handsome friend take his choice of the girls. With his flashing smile, his sporty cars, and backed with an inexhaustible supply of ready cash, it hadn't been difficult. Only once had it mattered very much to Holland; the time he'd lost Gloria to his self-indulgent friend. Oh, it hadn't been too long, of course, before Thurber had lost interest in his latest conquest, and Gloria had come crawling back, but Holland wasn't the kind to be satisfied with Thurber's discards.

"If Janet caught you cheating, why didn't she get a divorce?"

"Oh, she would have, if she could have proved anything. She just didn't have enough tangible proof. Since then I've never strayed, not even once, for Janet told me she'd gouge me for all the alimony she could get for the rest of my life." Thurber stopped short. "The rest of my life," he repeated bitterly.

The room was silent for a long embarrassed minute, each man ab-

sorbed in his own thoughts. Finally Dr. Holland cleared his throat.

"Well, Harry, it doesn't seem to me it would make a great deal of difference if you strayed from the straight and narrow now. You might as well make the most of the time you have left." He paused, cleared his throat again, then hurried on. "What I mean is, after all, how much alimony can she collect in a few months?"

Thurber rose from his chair, and this time his legs were steady.

"By Jupiter, Phil, you know, you're right! Why should I give a hoot what she finds out now?"

"Then you're not going to tell her the bad news?"

"I *am* not! I'll let it come as a big surprise. Tomorrow I'm going to see my lawyer and fix things so she won't get a cent, at least not more than a few dollars so she can't contest my will." He started for the door, then turned. "Wouldn't it be a good joke if I kicked off by being shot by a jealous husband?"

"Are you sure you're all right? Do you feel like driving? Could I drop you off someplace?" Holland asked.

"I'm okay now, Phil. Thanks anyway. I'll drop in once in a while to see if medical science has come up with any new miracle drugs, or maybe to get a prescription for

some pep pills—or hormones . . .”

He planted his expensive hat firmly on his head, cocked just a trifle to one side, and vanished through the door.

From his window, in the thin, waning light, Dr. Holland watched the convertible leave the parking lot. With an almost reckless abandon the driver barged into the passing stream of cars. Behind, at a discreet distance, an unobstrusive blue sedan pulled out and followed the big car.

Holland checked the outer office to be sure Miss Graham had gone. Then, with quick, sure strokes, he dialed a number. After a couple of buzzes he heard a throaty “Hello” at the other end of the line.

“Hello, Janet,” he said. “This is Phil.”

“Phil! How did it go?”

“Harry took the bad news like a trooper.”

“I’m a little surprised. I was almost sure he’d break down and cry.”

“I thought he might, too, but he didn’t. If I ever saw a man who

wanted to live it up while he still had a chance, it was Harry.”

Janet’s low-pitched laugh filled the phone. “Poor love-starved Harry!” she said.

“Yeah, and how surprised he’d be right now if he knew he had another thirty years, barring accidents, to sow his wild oats.”

“And I had thirty years to collect alimony from him!”

“I hope so. By the way, did you arrange for a private detective?”

“Yes, the agency said there would be a man following Harry twenty-four hours a day, as long as necessary.”

“Good! I’m pretty sure he’s on the job right now.”

Again came the low laugh. “Phil,” Janet said, “you’ll never know how much I appreciate this.”

“It was a pleasure, Janet, a real pleasure. Good-bye, now.”

Dr. Holland gently replaced the receiver in its cradle. He closed the door, being sure it was locked behind him, then made his way down the corridor toward the elevator, whistling a cheery little tune as he went.



As the French might say, "He who excuses himself accuses himself."

ED ADAMS had been murdered. His body had been found by his wife Maude in the wind-tilted red barn. A pitchfork stuck up from his back. Now, anyone in his right mind can tell you a man doesn't take his own life by ramming a pitchfork between his shoulder blades.

The Midwest sun was hot, the sky was blue, the air was dry. It was a good day for a funeral, too



good, actually, for the man we were burying, and certainly better than the night he had been killed. There had been a summer storm that night, one of those noisy storms with lightning flash-

ing and thunder a constant rumble. Sheriff Malone had already theorized the storm had helped the killer. The noise of the thunder had undoubtedly covered Ed Adams' scream when the fork had

been shoved into him. Nobody on the Adams farm had heard Ed cry out; not Maude nor their daughter Elsie Lou, who were in the main house, nor Abe and Maryanne Carter, who were in the tenant house.

At least, that's what they had told Sheriff Malone.

I stood in the intersection of the main corner in the business district, blocking traffic from three directions so the car procession could travel uninterrupted from Jeff Brown's funeral parlor out to the cemetery on the east city limit. Malone was at the cemetery entrance. If you want to be technical, neither of us had to be at these posts. Funeral processions are under the jurisdiction of the town's two-man police department, but Nestor is a small countyseat town and Malone and I always give a helping hand if we aren't busy with county business.

I kept the long procession moving with a constant waving of my arm. No doubt about it, this was the biggest funeral we'd had in Nestor since we buried old Avon Henry, the son of the man who had founded Henry County. Actually, the turnout of folks was kinda amazing.

It was Maude and Elsie Lou, of course. Folks were paying their respects, all right, but not to Ed

Adams. Ed wasn't our kind. He had been arrogant, an egotist, and downright mean. He hadn't liked people and people hadn't liked him. That kind of attitude probably had helped him amass his fortune, all right, but it hadn't earned him any badges for congeniality.

Maude and Elsie Lou were different. Folks liked them although nobody understood how Maude had put up with Ed for twenty-nine years, and everyone was sure that someday Elsie Lou would tell her father where he could go. You just can't totally dominate two people without something snapping sooner or later. Well, it had snapped for Ed, okay. Folks weren't actually saying it was Maude or Elsie Lou—or maybe the two of them together—who had shoved the fork into Ed's back, but there was plenty of over-the-fence speculation.

They finished burying Ed by 3:30 that afternoon. From my vantage on the slatted bench in the shadow of the ancient courthouse, I watched the cars return to the business district from the cemetery while I waited for Malone, and I knew the feeling of a necessary task having been completed. Well, almost completed; there was the investigation yet. Malone and I were going to have to determine just who had killed Ed. Malone

had thought it best to delay the prying until after the funeral out of respect to Maude and Elsie Lou, but now the funeral was over so . . .

I watched Malone brake the county sedan in a long tree shadow at the curb. He joined me on the bench. He was perspiring freely as he jackknifed his long, weathered frame beside me with a sigh of relief and lit a cigarette. Then he reflected, "It's been eighteen years since we've had a murder in Henry County. I'd been sheriff almost seven years when old Bob Morgenthaw took a shotgun to Rudy Paine. You didn't know Bob or Rudy, did you, Thad?"

"No."

He wagged his head. "There was no mystery there. Old Bob was a pretty big cattle man in these parts and he caught Rudy short-weighting some of his stock at the sale barn and that was it. Old Bob drove out to his place, got the gun, came back into town and blasted Rudy. He didn't even bother to kite out, but just sat there at the barn with the gun cradled, waiting for me to come and get him."

"Sounds like this Rudy was due a killin'."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Ed Adams was due a killin', Barry. You can't argue that."

"Uh-huh," he said thoughtfully.

"You know what I mean," I said, instantly defensive.

He smoked, silently.

"He killed my wife. As sure as we're sittin' here, Barry, he murdered—"

"No," Malone interrupted. "It wasn't murder, Thad. He struck Velda with his car, true. He'd had a drink, true. But he wasn't drunk. The tests proved that. And Velda *did* step from between two parked cars into Ed's path. People saw that much."

"He ran over her just like he ran over everyone he ever knew," I said sourly.

"And he paid."

"Paid? A suspended sentence! Fined! Is that how much value you put on a human life, Barry?"

Malone looked at me, his deep blue eyes narrow under shaggy brows. "I've never heard you talk like this, fella."

"You've never seen me roll around in that empty bed at night, either."

"You've stored up a lot of hate."

"So it's spilling over," I said bitterly.

"Enough?"

I measured his look. "For what?"

"To kill Ed Adams? You were off duty that night."

I continued to measure him,

then said, "What do you think?"

He was quiet for a long time. Then he dropped the cigarette and twisted it against the cracked sidewalk with a toe of his shoe. "You could have, but I don't think you did." Then he stood up and was at ease again. Towering over me, he allowed a crooked grin. "So let's find out who did. Maude corralled me at the cemetery. She wants us to drive out to the farm."

"Now?"

"She'n Elsie Lou were goin' home alone. She turned thumbs down on folks goin' with 'em. She wants to talk to us."

"So maybe we don't know Maude Adams like we thought we did, huh?"

"How's that?"

"She sounds mighty cold-blooded to me."

"Could be." He shrugged.

The Adams place was on the highway east of town, about a mile out. One thing about Ed Adams, he had been a neat man and his place reflected it. The buildings had been kept up and the thick-grassed, deeply-shaded yards in front of the large, white frame main house to the left of the only red shale drive in all of Henry County, and the smaller, yellow-tinted tenant house to the right of the drive looked manicured. Adams land stretched out

in every direction from the two houses, was tautly fenced and sprouted crops that appeared laid down by a slide rule. Straight ahead when Malone turned the county sedan into the drive was the red barn, the death scene. It had been tilted slightly by an early spring windstorm and now looked a bit incongruous with the other buildings. If Ed had lived, the barn would have been straightened by summer's end.

Maude and Elsie Lou were in webbed chairs in the front yard of the main house. They stood as Malone braked the sedan under a large oak at the edge of the turnaround. They had changed clothing, Maude forsaking the simple black dress she'd worn to the funeral for a bright cotton; Elsie Lou, bare-legged, tanned and healthy-looking at nineteen, wearing a white blouse, pink skirt and scuffed moccasins, her golden hair catching arrows of sunlight that pierced the tree leaves.

Maude was stony-faced when she greeted us. On Elsie Lou's oval face you could see a strange mixture of suppressed feelings deep in her green-flecked eyes. The shock of her father's death—*how* he had died—was still there, and there was the strain of the past few days; but far back, if you looked hard, you could also find

relief. More important, I thought, was what you *couldn't* find in those eyes: grief.

Maude put us in chairs. "Barry," she said in a firm voice, "you have questions to ask. I thank you for waiting until now, but I see no reason for further delay."

"You're standin' up well, Maude," Malone said.

I knew he was stalling, organizing in his mind, putting his questions for her and Elsie Lou in proper order. He was that kind of man. Actually, I was more interested in Elsie Lou.

I didn't hold it against her for not grieving. I didn't know all of the trials an attractive, nineteen year old girl had endured while being reared by a man the likes of Ed Adams, but enough were common gossip in Nestor to understand why this girl might find a certain amount of solace in his passing. Ed Adams had ruled his daughter with an iron hand. She hadn't lacked the necessities, of course, but she had missed out on most of the frills and fun of blossoming into the teens, the most important gap being boys. Ed Adams had been a passionately displeased man when it came to Elsie Lou and boys. No young feller in all Henry County would go near Elsie Lou Adams if he was interested in self-preservation because Ed

would've had his head for breakfast.

On the other hand, there was Fred Tole whose father owned the only hardware store in Nestor. Fred was Elsie Lou's age, a first-year college boy now home for the summer vacation and different than most of the young'uns around the county. He was a good lad, easygoing most of the time, seldom in any kind of trouble, and found a laugh in most things. Folks, me included, liked Fred Tole, but the boy had a polite defiant streak in him, too. If he felt he was correct, if he felt he was being properly respectful, he stuck by his guns in any controversy. He wouldn't be pushed. It had been like that with him and Elsie Lou. He was interested in the girl, had coveted her with proper respect, politeness and kindness and, in this, he had firmly defied Ed Adams. I'm not sure that Fred Tole had ever actually told Ed to take his 19th Century inhibitions and plumb go fly a kite, but the boy had that kind of gall in him.

Attach to this a liking by Elsie Lou Adams for Fred Tole and his ways, and then mix in a generous amount of turn-about when it came to Ed Adams satisfying his own lusts with Maryanne Carter, who lived in the yellow tenant house, and you could see where

Elsie Lou might find it difficult to summon grief over her father's demise.

It also made you wonder about Maude Adams. The woman was not stupid. She was not constructed of stone. She had to be aware of her husband's passion, and somewhere behind the carefully controlled outer shell there had to be emotions.

I sat in the chair listening to Malone's questions and Maude's answers, and attempted to inventory both Maude and Elsie Lou without being obvious. Maude was blunt, completely resigned to the necessity of the investigation. Elsie Lou sat quietly, listening intently, I thought. Occasionally, I'd catch her sliding an oblique glance toward me. A quick, uncertain smile would twitch across her faintly painted lips and then she would again concentrate on the words between her mother and Malone.

I started to pay attention to those words, too. Malone was finally getting down to the meat of things.

"All right, Maude," he said, "this is what we know. Ed left the house about eight o'clock. He didn't say where he was going. He—"

"You knew my husband, Barry," Maude put in. "He wasn't one for words."

Malone continued as if he had

not been interrupted. "The storm came up about nine. Elsie Lou went to bed. She doesn't like storms. But you sat in the front room watching television. Then along about eleven you heard a car turn in. You thought it was your husband returning home, but when Ed didn't come into the house a few minutes later you became curious and went to a window and looked out. You saw Abe Carter's car over by the tenant house. It was Abe you had heard drive in, not Ed. I understand Abe attended an American Legion meeting in town that night."

"Yes," Maude nodded to all of it.

"Were there lights on in the tenant house?"

"Yes," Maude said firmly and then she turned to her daughter. "Elsie Lou, bring a pitcher of iced tea."

"I'll pass, Maude," Malone said.

"Me too," I echoed.

"Then fetch me a glass, Elsie Lou."

The girl's face was blank as she left us to enter the house, but I had a strong suspicion she knew why she was being sent on the errand.

Malone took quick advantage of her absence. "The morning after Ed was killed, Maude, his car was found parked in a lane only a half

mile down the road from here."

"I know," she said without expression.

"He left the house around eight. He could've walked back and then Abe could've come home from the Legion meeting sooner than was expected."

"It wasn't Abe, Barry."

"Why are you protecting him?"

"A woman learns to put up with a lot of things in life, Barry Malone. Maybe I've put up with more than most women should, Elsie Lou bein' the main reason. A nineteen year old girl needs a home, no matter what. On the other hand, I never would protect the man who killed my own husband. It wasn't Abe Carter."

"I wish I could be as sure, Maude."

"I saw the man run from the barn."

"You're standin' at the window, you're lookin' over at the Carter place, and you see this man run from the barn."

"It was raining buckets, Barry, but there was so much lightning it was almost as if the world was lighted."

"But you didn't recognize the man."

"I know it was a man, that's all."

"And not Abe?"

"No, I don't think it was Abe."

"A moment ago you were positive."

"The man who came from the barn didn't run to the tenant house. He ran off toward town."

"Which doesn't necessarily eliminate Abe Carter."

"Well, no, but—"

"Was he built physically like Abe?"

"No . . ."

"Was he young, middle-aged or—"

"Barry, I just don't know!"

"Could it have been the Tole boy?"

"Fred Tole?" Maude looked startled.

"Ed's thinking about Elsie Lou and boys wasn't exactly a secret, Maude," Malone said flatly, "and we all know Fred Tole. The boy has a defiant streak in him a mile wide."

"It could have been Fred," Maude said slowly, "but I don't think it was."

Malone switched his line of questioning suddenly. "Maude, why did you go down to the barn?" he asked. "I mean, it was raining hard, it was—"

"It was a hunch, Barry. A . . ." She shrugged. ". . . feeling. I saw a man running and I knew something wasn't right."

"You didn't kill your husband, did you?"

"No!" she denied emphatically.

"You didn't hear Abe drive in, go to the window, watch Abe enter the yellow house over there, then see your husband sneaking out the back door and bolting for the barn?"

"It could've happened that way," she admitted, "but it didn't."

Malone seemed to ponder her answer, and then he stood suddenly, just as Elsie Lou came out of the house carrying two glasses of iced tea. "Okay, Maude," he said. "Guess we'll chat with the Carters for a few minutes. I see their car over there."

"They're home," she said. "They drove in from the funeral just ahead of us. They're going to be leaving in a couple of weeks. I've given Abe notice. We both agree it will be much better if he and Maryanne leave the county now. I'll find someone else to work the land."

Barry and I crossed the shale drive, and the rear door of the small tenant house opened as we approached. Abe Carter, large, rawboned, balding at thirty, necktie pulled down, white shirt collar opened, pushed the screen door open for us and said, "Come in, come in, Sheriff. We saw you comin'."

His wife sat at the kitchen table. She had changed into shorts

and a blouse, filling them both well. Her long, bare legs were crossed, the top foot was cocked under the table and a brown loafer hung loose from her toes. Her red smile for the both of us was generous; then she lifted a ciga-



rette to those lips, inhaled deeply.

"We can offer you a beer," she said.

"No," Malone refused.

I remained silent.

Maryanne Carter's dark eyes laughed at me; her lips looked swollen and sensuous as she pulled on the cigarette. Drat her! She disturbed me—she'd disturb any man—she knew, and she was laughing at me.

"Well, I'm going to have one," she said. She left the table, took a can from a small refrigerator and snapped a pop top.

Her husband was at a small sink opposite us. I concentrated on him. There was a window over

the sink, but the cotton curtains were closed against the late afternoon sun. I watched him part the curtains, look out toward the drive and the main house, then turn to us. When he found me surveying him, his face reddened slightly.

"Habit is strong, I guess," he said with a sheepish grin. He came to the table, scooped up the beer can quickly and drank. "This is nasty business, huh, Sheriff?" he asked Malone. "Tough on Mrs. Adams and that girl over there."

"Yeah," Malone agreed. Then he hit Abe between the eyes. "Maude tells us you folks are pushin' on."

Abe reddened again and fidgeted. "Tha's right."

Did I detect an edge of animosity?

"Know where you're goin'?"

"No."

"But you know *why* you're goin'," Malone said significantly.

These hardnose tactics surprised me. This wasn't the Malone I knew. Normally his questions were pointed but gentle. I shot a look at him. He appeared grim, determined.

Abe said, "Well, we have our reasons, naturally." The words were clipped.

"So I've heard."

Abe was abruptly defiant. "What does that mean?"

Malone looked down at Maryanne. "Ed Adams just didn't hap-

pen to be over here the night he was killed, did he?"

She arched a finely penciled brow. "Sheriff, I think you have a dirty mind."

"Your husband, I understand, was in town, at a Legion meeting."

"So?"

"You tell me, Mrs. Carter."

"There's nothin' to tell!" Abe cried out, his face now fiery red. "Look, these stories about Ed Adams and Maryanne are . . . are distorted. They—"

"Ed Adams was an *old* man, Sheriff," Maryanne put in. She looked smug, chuckled, drew on the cigarette. "Man, if I wanted to dip around, do you think I'd pick on the ancient? I'd . . . well, I'd be a helluva lot more inclined to go along with some guy like your deputy here."

I felt on fire as she chuckled again. I wished I was somewhere else—anywhere. The scent of her was suddenly heavy in the tiny kitchen.

Malone came to the rescue. He said stonily, "You had reason to kill him, Abe."

Abe wailed, "No more than anyone else!"

"Like whom?" Malone snapped.

"Well . . ." Abe hesitated, shuffled his feet. "What about Mrs. Adams?" he said quickly. "That story of hers about a man runnin'

in and out of the barn could be . . . could be a lotta hogwash. Mrs. Adams had plenty of reason to want Ed Adams dead! She inherits this place, doesn't she?"

"And if she does?"

"Well, a section of land ain't to be sneered at."

"Do you really think it happened that way, Abe?" Malone paused. "And for that reason?"

Abe fidgeted again, suddenly was silent.

"I'd rather talk about a man who wrote a check about a year ago and used Ed Adams' signature," Malone said.

Abe stiffened. "That's finished!"

"Was it?" Malone shot a glance at Maryanne again. "Or was Ed usin' it as a club to get somethin' he wanted?"

"No! It wasn't like that a-tall!"

"I'm afraid it was, Abe. Ed Adams wasn't the kind of man to let another fella beat him out of anything. With Ed Adams, the other fella *always* paid. I knew somethin' was up the day he came to me and wanted to press charges against you, and then came back later and said to forget the whole thing. I didn't know what Ed had in mind then, but it became obvious later. Both you and Maryanne have been payin' a steep price for that check."

"Not me, Sheriff," she said from

the table, a flicker of a smile playing at the corners of her red mouth. "Ed Adams never was *that* much trouble—for me," she said.

She hit me hard. I'd never known her kind of woman. You hear about them, you read about them, but I'd never known one.

She jarred Malone, too. He didn't look it, but I knew that inside he was caught up in loathing distaste.

He turned suddenly and went out of the house, but we were in the sedan and heading back to Nestor before he finally exploded, "Damn, why do they make that kind of women, Thad?"

I didn't have an answer.

"That check! That damned check!"

"Ed Adams had a hold," I admitted.

"On Abe maybe! Not on that woman! She just doesn't give a damn! She could have filed a complaint with me!"

"Abe," I pressed.

"Yeah," Malone said. "He probably snapped. Finally. But how are we gonna prove it?"

Nestor was quiet in five o'clock heat.

"You want me to drive you home?" Malone asked.

I shot him a look. "I thought we might be gonna talk to the Tole

boy now. Change your mind?"

"I've already talked to his father. The two of them, Fred and Leonard Tole, were in Des Moines the night Ed was killed."

"Oh?" I digested that, then: "Well, if we're finished for the day I'll buy you a drink in my kitchen."

His grunt was acceptance.

He braked the county sedan in the drive beside the small bungalow I once had shared with a wife but now occupied alone. We went around to the shaded back yard.

"Park," I told him. "The house will be hot."

He sat on the third step going up to the cluttered back stoop. The stoop needed cleaning. I'd have to get to that chore some day soon—along with a lot of other domestic chores. It seemed that ever since Velda had been killed things had piled up around the house.

An old broom had fallen across the screened door and my run-about galoshes were in the way. I set the broom aside and kicked the galoshes out of my path.

Malone talked to me through the screen door while I dug out ice cubes and mixed the bourbon and tap water. "You got any definite ideas about the killin', Thad?"

"Sure. Abe Carter."

"He was at the Legion meeting. I've checked."

"Sure, but Maude said she saw this guy runnin' from the barn *after* Abe got home."

"And then again maybe someone else was lurking 'round the place."

"Huh?"

"Maybe someone else saw Abe going into the Legion Hall that night. Maybe someone else had a yen for Maryanne Carter. Maybe someone else went out to the Adams' place, found Maryanne busy, became caught up in jealousy, desire—and revenge—chased Ed Adams into his barn, killed him . . ."

With a drink in each hand, I kicked open the screen door. Barry Malone couldn't prove a thing—except that he sat there on my back porch steps and he was picking red shale chips from the dried mud caked on the shoe scraper on the bottom step.

He twisted and looked up at me. "I only know of one driveway in the entire county that's shaled," he said.

I stood frozen.

"You know," he went on, "a man ain't had occasion to wear galoshes since the night Ed was killed. That's the last time it rained. I'd like to see your galoshes, Thad. Now!"

I didn't attempt to run—not from *this* Malone.

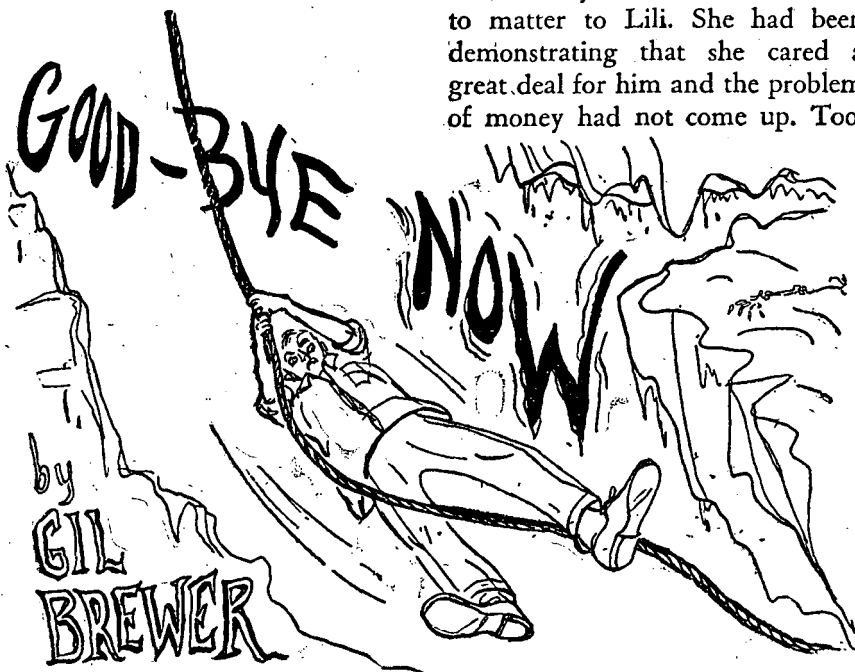
Mutual affection, it seems, is not invariably a component of "a fond adieu".



LILI Southern was a very dainty dish. She also had many fine connections so Al Walters could not figure why she went for him, at first. Of course, he had to admit he was handsome, young, energetic, and with a few mild connections of his own. The trouble was, those connections were just that—mild—

and this also puzzled Al because Lili was used to traveling with big game. That her regular fat wallet was now in prison, behind bars for robbery, murder and a number of other things, might possibly explain it.

When Al Walters considered his finances, he felt dour. He had very little money but this did not seem to matter to Lili. She had been demonstrating that she cared a great deal for him and the problem of money had not come up. Too,



Brent Morgan was in clink, and it was unlikely he would get out for a long time, if ever, so there was nothing to worry about there. Also, Lili had long since given up visiting her ex-affair.

"I like your background. It thrills me," Lili told Al. "Every time I think of you climbing ropes, and hurtling through the air, I get goose pimples."

"That was a good time ago," Al said.

They were at her place, listening to music, having a drink, cuddled up on the sofa. She wore shimmering black, and her long blonde hair curled softly on her shoulder. Al inspected the full length of her, moved an inch closer. He could never get enough of her, yet he was preoccupied with the problem of money. This girl, Lili, was meant for money.

"Could you still do those things?" she asked.

"What things?"

He took a sip of expensive Scotch, and lifted an eyebrow quizzically.

"You know. Trapeze work, and all that, like you did when you were with the circus."

"You sure make it sound like something."

"It must've been exciting. Can you still do those things?"

"I suppose it wouldn't take me

long to get back in practice. I hope I never have to do it again, though. I hurt myself in a fall once. That's why I quit. Of course, I'm older now, too."

"Would that matter?"

He looked at her quickly, hoping he had not said the wrong thing, and quickly flexed the muscles of one bicep against her arm.

"I'm not that much older," he said. "Don't worry, it's still there."

"Oh, well," she said, "you'll never have to do it again. Gee, though, when I think of you sitting right here next to me—and that you'd fly through the air, and climb all those ropes, and everything—it just flips me, I'll tell you."

"I used to double as a cowboy, too. Did tricks," he said.

Lili took a dainty little sip of her drink, eyeing him quietly over the rim of the glass with big round brown eyes that were as beguiling as a summer's midnight.

He liked having her look up to him—but she was such an expensive package. He was broke all the time now, and he knew if he did not lie about the money he had, telling her he had a lot more than he suspected he would ever get, then she might drop him cold.

"Brent was pretty good, in his way," she said, "but he could never fly through the air, or climb ropes. He could never do anything

like that. It just wasn't in him." She seldom mentioned Brent Morgan.

"You and he were real close, I guess?"

"Yes. Well, that's all past now. You know that, honey." She took another sip of her drink. "Besides, I'd rather think about you—about us. We're much closer than I ever was with Brent."

"Don't snow me, Lili. Best you don't talk about it."

"Well, Brent and I *were* pretty close, and all. I know a lot of things."

Al, finally conscious of deep silence, said, "You know a lot of things?"

"Uh-huh. Lots."

"Brent Morgan was big," Al said. "Even in prison, he's pretty big."

"He's all washed up," she said. "Besides, he's in for life."

Al bet she had secrets, plenty of them, things he would never know about. Brent Morgan had played the big time, able to do anything, but Al, well, he more or less just scavenged along the edges.

"I have something to tell you," Lili said. "I think it's time you know. I couldn't tell you right away. I had to wait. You'll see why."

Al set his glass down carefully on the cocktail table in front of

them. He watched her, waiting. "Something about Brent and me," she said. "Something you'll be interested in."

"Oh?"

"Al, darling," she said, "I know very well you haven't any money. Face it. We need money, big money, and I can't see how you're going to get it."

For the first time this evening, he didn't feel like speaking.

"So I've figured a way to do something about it," Lili said. "That is, with your help."

"I see," Al said. He did not see anything. He had no idea what was coming, but he hoped he was ready for it.

"You'd better have another drink," she said. "You'll need it."

She fixed him one, rising and moving to the bar across the room. He watched the way her hips moved under the tight-fitting black sheen of dress, and wondered what it was she had to tell him. She returned with the drink, plumped down and snuggled closer to him than before. One of her hands sought out the muscles of his arm. He sipped his drink and waited.

"There was a robbery nobody knows about," she said. "The take was big, and everybody was paid off. Still there was plenty left. This happened just before Brent went to prison."

"So?" he said nonchalantly.
"It was a lot of money."

He looked at her. "How much?"

"Nearly three thundred thousand dollars, after everybody was paid off."

He mused on that for a moment, then sighed softly. That much money was just a dream.

"Brent engineered the job," Lili said.

He turned to her, interested. "Nothing like that came out at the trial, did it?"

"Oh, no. It couldn't. Nobody knew of Brent's connection with the robbery."

"Nobody?"

"Just little old me."

He sat there. Then what he was thinking became part of the dream, and he knew it was impossible.

"You'd better tell me all of it, Lili."

"Well, it was a bank robbery. After everybody but one man was paid off, one man besides Brent, that is—then Brent hid the money."

He watched her.

She blinked. "I know where he hid it, you see?"

"You know where Brent Morgan hid nearly three hundred thousand dollars?"

"That's right."

He began to realize what she was saying. Numbed, his voice was

hoarse. "If you know where it is, why don't you get it? Why haven't you gotten it long before this? Brent's in prison. He can't bother you."

"That's where you come in."

He sat there digesting what little he knew.

She said, "Will you help me get it, Al? Then we'll have all the money we need."

Would he help her? It was wild. He could hardly contain himself. He got up and started pacing back and forth across the room.

"There was another man in it?"

"One other man knew where the money was hidden."

"Where is he? Who is he?"

She made a motion with one hand. "He just sort of vanished." She took a sip of her drink. "There's no need to bother yourself about him at all."

"Where's the money hidden?"

"I'll show you. We have to drive there."

"Baby, if you're kidding me about this . . ."

"It's all true, Al. I just had to wait and make certain you were never fibbing to me about how much you love me. You aren't lying, are you?"

He hardly heard her, barely felt her as she put her arms around him and kissed him. It was the big thing and he knew it. He

could feel it. You never knew how or when a thing like this would happen. You just waited for it to show. Sometimes you waited a whole lifetime for nothing, but sometimes, like now, one fine day, out of the blue . . . He had to know where the money was. It was a lot of money. He had to make certain she wasn't just fooling around with him.

"Where do we have to go?" he asked.

"Quite a way," she told him. "We'd better get started, too. The quicker the better, that's what I say."

They drove all that night. On the outskirts of the city, she insisted he buy a rifle and ammunition. A sport store was still open, so he got what he wanted. She said that since they were headed off the main highways into the mountains of West Virginia, where there were wild animals, and since they would have to leave the car, she did not want to take any chances. Al, himself, felt more secure with the rifle at hand.

Driving along through the night, he did a lot of earnest thinking. "Why didn't you get the money long ago? For yourself?"

"It's in a cave," she said. "I could never get it myself. You'll see why."

He glanced at Lili. She was so

certain about everything. He must have played every card exactly right with her, to have her tell him about a thing like this. Brent Morgan had really lost a girl when he went to the pen.

Still, it paid to take care.

They stopped at an all-night service station for gas, and Lili went to the rest room. While he waited for her, he did some serious thinking. She returned, smiling, and they drove on.

"It's not much farther," she said finally. "You'll see."

"I hope it isn't. These mountain roads are dangerous at night."

It was tough driving, and now they were on dirt roads that curled up around chasms extending off into black nothingness where he did not dare look. They followed a river for some time, then cut off up a sharp incline.

"This is where we have to abandon the car," she told him. "It's only a short distance to the cave."

They made their way up a steep wooded slope, and across a rocky field thick with briar. Daylight was breaking as they made their way into the mouth of the cave. It was really a cavern, with walls of rock flowing upward to the vaulted ceiling. Ledges and broken cliffs towered above, and more shadowed caverns were revealed beyond the main one. Lili had a

flashlight, but a yellow wash from the morning sun splayed in across the bottom of the cave, lighting it quite well.

They moved deeper into the cavern. Finally, Lili paused where stone walls leaned upward in the hazy light. Al watched as she probed behind some fallen rocks with the rifle butt, and came up with a heavy coil of rope.

"You'll have to lift this, honey." She turned and pointed upward. "See that ledge, 'way up there?"

He nodded, his heart thudding. It was high up, just touched by a vagrant finger of sunlight that came in the open mouth of the cave.

"That's where the money is, in a suitcase."

Al's breathing quickened.

"There are two ledges," she said. "See the one to the right? There's a pointed rock, right on the edge, see it?"

"Yeah."

"You throw a loop of rope around that rock, climb up to the first ledge. Then you take the rope, and throw it across that chasm, high up, where there's another rock. Then you can swing over to the other ledge, on the left, and get the money. You being an acrobat, you should be able to do it."

"You mean somebody else was able to do that?"

"Yes. The other man, Al. Brent

couldn't do it, but you can. I know you can. Brent made sure it was in a safe place. Nobody could ever find it."

"It's safe, all right."

"Can you do it, Al?" She was excited.

He uncoiled the rope, made a loop at one end, and tried a first heave in an effort to get the loop around the pointed rock on the right hand ledge. It took time. It was not easy, and he was nervous this close to the money.

"Nobody'd ever find it," Lili said, "unless he knew where it was."

Excitement gripped Al now. He had managed to loop the rope around the pointed rock. He snagged it secure. Now he had to climb up the rope. The past was finally paying off.

"Here we go," he said.

He began to shinny up the rope. He swung in against the rock wall, and showers of dust scattered down, chips of stone rattled on the cave floor.

It was a hard climb, but not too difficult for Al, even though he was out of practice. Moments later, he heaved himself up on the ledge. He looked down and grinned at Lili, who was eagerly watching.

Quickly, then, he loosened the rope and made ready to cast for the

rock above the other ledge. This part would scare most men, but heights did not bother Al.

"Can you make it?" Lili called.

"There she is," Al said. The loop of rope was around the other rock. "Here we go again."

He stepped back, made a leap, grabbed high on the rope, and swung across the chasm to the other ledge. His feet scraped against the rock.

A ray of morning sunlight shone brightly on a large suitcase lightly covered with dust.

"It's here," he gasped. "It's here!" he shouted.

She called something, but he did not catch what it was in his excitement.

"Al!"

He heard her now.

"Al? Tie the rope to the suitcase after you get it loose from the rock. Then let the suitcase down on the rope. That's how we got it up there."

Kneeling, he unsnapped the clasps on the lid of the case, flipped it open. His face tightened. It was packed with greenbacks. A kind of heady calm came over him. All that money, nearly three hundred thousand dollars! He touched it with his fingers.

"Al? What're you doing?"

He fastened the clasps again. Then he unhooked the rope from

the rock, tied it to the handle of the suitcase.

"Ready?" he called down to her.

"I'll say I am."

She waited below as he lowered the suitcase. They were looking into each other's eyes, smiling. She caught the case, put it on the cave floor. He stood there loosely holding the rope, laughing.

"We got it," he called.

She looked up at him. Abruptly, she grabbed the rope, yanked it with all her strength. It slipped from his grip. He heard her laugh, and saw her pick up the rifle. He stood there, looking down into the muzzle of the rifle.

"I'm meeting Brent," she said, her voice echoing in the cave, reverberating from the walls. "He's trying for a prison break. He'll make it, too. He engineered this, Al. He had me hunt for an acrobat, and I finally found you. I picked you up, remember?"

He remembered, all right. The rifle was steady.

She said, "We had to do away with the other fellow, Al, because he knew where the money was. For a while Brent and I were worried we wouldn't ever be able to get it back. I love Brent Morgan. You could never be half the man he is, even if you can shinny up a rope."

"So that's how it is?" he said.

"That's how it is, Al. Good-bye, now."

He saw her squeeze the trigger of the rifle. There was an echoing click. She seemed frustrated. She tried again. Again the rifle clicked on an empty chamber.

"Give it up, Lili," he called to her. "I emptied that gun at the service station where we stopped. Figured I shouldn't take any chances."

"Curse you!" she yelled. She flung the rifle down, fumbled at the suitcase. "It doesn't matter. You'll die up there, and you've got company, too. Look around the corner of that ledge!"

Al took a step, glanced around the corner of rock, and saw the grinning skull, the clothed remains of a man lying on the ledge. Shreds of skin clung to the naked bones. A round hole showed in the center of the skull's forehead. He had been shot when he deposited the money up here.

Then Al grinned. He saw something else—a coil of rope—partially hidden beneath the skeleton. Snatching it up, he made a fast loop, leaped to the brink of the ledge.

"Good-bye, now," Lili called and started walking away with the suitcase.

Al made a desperate throw with the rope. The loop whistled out from the ledge, circled down,

coiled around the girl's body. Al snatched it tight. She dropped the suitcase and grabbed at the tightening loop.

Slowly, Al drew her toward the face of the rock wall. "Told you I doubled as a cowboy," he called to her. "I did rope tricks. What d'you think of that?"

He began to hoist her up the side of the wall, toward the ledge. She was screaming, now, long throat-shredding screams that bounded wildly from the walls of the cave.

Al dragged her onto the ledge, took the rope off her and shoved her over by the skeleton. She saw that and began to scream still louder.

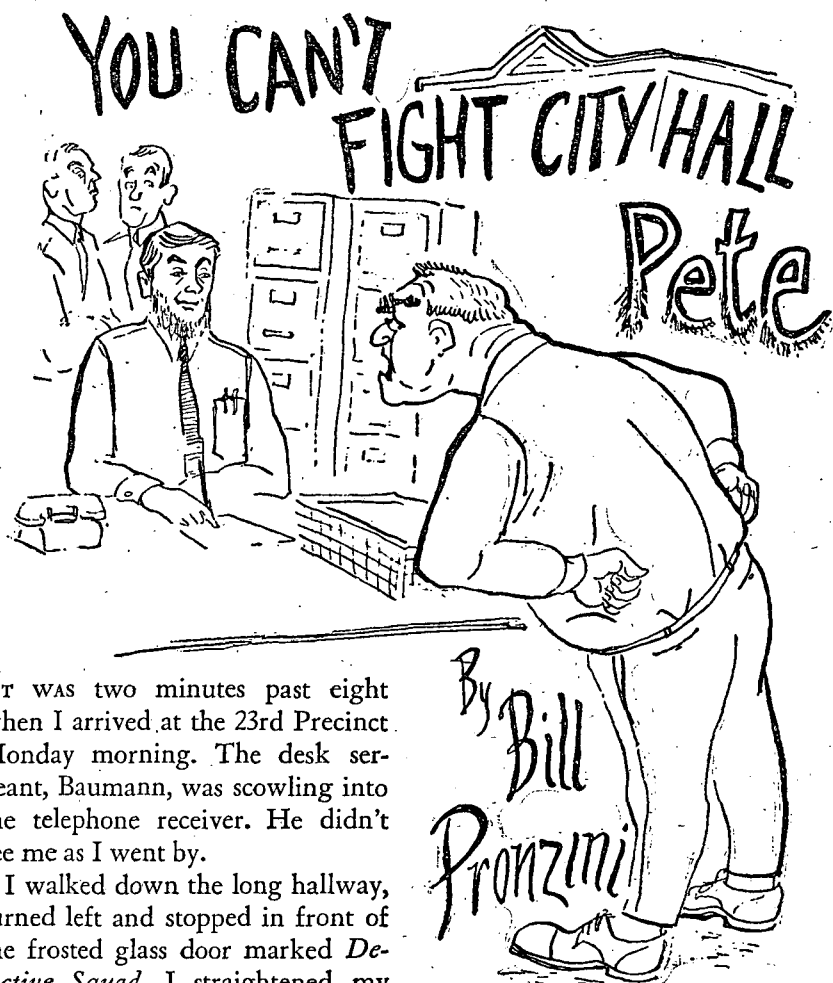
Al threw the rope and snagged a rock on the other ledge. Lili leaped at him, clawing at him, but he grinned and shoved her away. Then, jumping off, he swung toward the other ledge and made it. He loosened the rope, fastened it to the pointed rock, then lowered himself to the cave floor.

"All!" she screamed. "Al, don't leave me! I'll die!"

Picking up the suitcase, Al called, "Good-bye, now."

Far up there on the ledge, Lili screamed and screamed, but once Al was outside the mouth of the cave, he could not hear her screams at all.

A "hairy" situation, it would appear, has a tendency toward revealing the unadorned truth.



It was two minutes past eight when I arrived at the 23rd Precinct Monday morning. The desk sergeant, Baumann, was scowling into the telephone receiver. He didn't see me as I went by.

I walked down the long hallway, turned left and stopped in front of the frosted glass door marked *Detective Squad*. I straightened my

tie, took a deep breath and put my hand on the knob. *Well, here we go*, I thought. I opened the door and stepped inside.

All the boys were there. Augie Canazarro was pecking on one of the pool typewriters, a yellow pencil held between his teeth. Doug Sales, a scowl on his brown face, pored over a sheaf of papers scattered on his desk. Pat Donovan and Cliff Ostrow were drinking coffee, talking animatedly.

I stood there, looking at them, and across to the closed door of Lieutenant Janine's office. I cleared my throat. "Morning," I said.

Donovan was the first to look up. He cocked his head to one side, frowning. "Yes, sir, can I help—?" Then he burst out laughing.

The rest of the boys looked up. They stared. The pencil dropped from Augie Canazarro's mouth, bounced on the corner of his desk, and rolled to the floor. His eyes looked like wide blue stones.

Donovan was leaning back in his chair, both hands wrapped across his big middle. There were tears in his eyes.

"I don't believe it," Doug Sales said.

Cliff Ostrow set down his coffee cup carefully. "Now I have seen everything," he said sadly. "Yes, I have been a cop for sixteen years and now I have seen everything."

I took off my hat and went to my desk. "I see you boys have managed to keep the building intact the past two weeks," I said.

They were still staring at me. Doug Sales scratched his nose. "Say, Pete," he said, laughing, "that's not *real*, is it? I mean, it's false, right?"

"Oh, it's real, all right," I said.

Donovan got up off his chair and waddled over to me. He put his hand on my chin and yanked.

"Hey!" I said. "Take it easy, will you?"

"Oh, man!" Donovan said. "*It is real.*" He broke off into fresh gales of laughter.

"What's the matter with you guys?" I asked. "Haven't you ever seen a beard before?"

"Are you *nuts*?" Augie said, his mouth still open.

"Too much sun," Cliff said sadly. "Too much sun on his vacation."

I heard a sound behind me. Turning, I saw Lieutenant Janine coming out of his cubbyhole. "What the hell's going on out here!" he yelled. "It sounds like you—"

He saw me looking at him and stopped. He craned his red neck forward like a rooster about to crow, and stared at me incredulously. His jaw dropped. He walked up to me, staring harder.

"Maddox?" he said uncertainly.

"Yes, sir." I faced him squarely.
"Maddox!" he yelled, certain now.

"Yes, sir."

He raised a trembling finger.
"What the hell is *that*?"

"It's a beard, sir."

"A—beard?" He almost strangled on the word.

"Yes, sir."

"You grew a *beard*?"

"I surely did, sir."

His nose got red. You could always tell when Janine was coming to a boil. His nose got very red, and then his ears. "Are you trying to be funny, Maddox?" he said in a deadly voice.

"No, sir," I said. "Not at all."

Donovan was still laughing, his huge stomach heaving. Janine glared at him. "Shut up!" he shouted.

Donovan shut up.

Janine looked back to me. "What are you trying to pull this time, Maddox?"

"Nothing, sir," I said innocently.

"This is a precinct station, Maddox," he said, voice rising. "A *police* station. Are you trying to make a mockery out of it?"

"Mockery, sir?"

"Coming in here with that—that damned *fuzz* on your face!" Janine yelled. "What's the idea?"

"No idea, sir," I said. "I just felt like growing a beard. I've al-

ways wanted to grow a beard, sir."

"You're a *cop*, Maddox! Cops can't go running around with beards!"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because they can't! It's not done!"

"Then I'm establishing a precedent, sir," I said, smiling at him.

Donovan snickered behind his hand.

Lieutenant Janine's face was an odd purplish color. "Shag your tail into the washroom and shave that thing off, Maddox!" he yelled. "Do you hear me! Right now!"

"No, sir," I said quietly.

"What? What did you say?"

"No, sir," I repeated.

"I'm giving you an order, Maddox!"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to respectfully disobey that order, sir."

It was suddenly very quiet in the squad room. I could hear the fan on top of the filing cabinets whirling softly. Everyone seemed to be holding his breath.

Janine's face was a half-inch from mine. We stared at each other, neither of us blinking. Then the lieutenant turned abruptly and stormed into his office. He slammed the door. The glass rattled.

I looked at Doug Sales. "Any more coffee left, Doug?" I asked.

They were eyeing me like I had sprouted a second head. Donovan

was still snickering. Cliff Ostrow just looked sad, his usual expression.

Augie stood from his desk and came over to mine. "Pete," he said. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, Augie," I said. He was probably my closest friend at the 23rd. I followed him to a corner of the squad room, near the window that overlooked the park across the street.

"Listen, Pete," Augie said, "what are you trying to prove?"

"I don't follow," I said.

"The hell you don't," Augie said. "You grew that beard to bug Janine, and don't tell me you didn't."

I raised my hand placatingly. "Okay," I said. "You're right. That was the reason in the beginning."

"You've had your fun," Augie said. "Now go in and shave that thing off before you get yourself in trouble, real trouble."

"You don't understand," I said. "I've kind of become attached to it. Besides, Carole says it makes me look distinguished."

"When are you going to grow up?" Augie asked. His usually passive face was dotted with anger now. "You've pushed your luck a bit too far this time, Pete. You've pulled some crazy stunts in the past, but this is going too far. Janine's not going to stand for this."

"Ah, hell," I said, grinning.

"Just what is it between you and him, Pete?"

I shrugged, sobering. "We're at opposites," I said. "I don't like him and I don't like his methods. And I don't like being his whipping boy either, new man on the squad or not."

"So pulling these stunts is going to change that?" Augie said. "You got a complaint, take it up with the captain."

"Sure, and get tapped for insubordination."

"What do you think *this* amounts to?"

"The beard? Augie, there's nothing in regulations that says you can't grow a beard."

"No?" he said. "Listen, buddy, this kind of thing can bust you back to pounding a beat in no-man's-land."

"My record's too good for that," I said confidently. I was feeling a little cocky. I'd gotten away with quite a bit in the year since I'd been under Janine at the 23rd.

"You think so?" Augie said. "Okay, just remember, I warned you."

I started to answer, but the door to Lieutenant Janine's office opened, and he stuck his fat, balding head out. "Maddox!" he bellowed. "Get in here! Right now!"

I grinned at Augie. "The Grand Inquisitioner calls," I said.

He shook his head and said nothing.

I went into Janine's office and shut the door. He was sitting behind his wide-gray desk now, a black cigar stuck in his mouth.

"Sit down, Maddox," he said.

I sat in the chair beside his desk.

He wore a satisfied smile. "I just talked to the captain."

I looked at him.

"I told him about your little adornment," Janine said. "You know what he said?"

"No, sir."

Janine looked at his cigar. "He said I have permission to place you under immediate suspension. Indefinitely, without pay."

"Suspension?" I said. I started out of the chair.

"That's right, Maddox. We've had just enough of your fun and games around here. We don't need no comedians in this precinct."

"You can't do this!" I shouted.

"Can't we?" Janine said. His dislike for me was plain on his fat face. "Well, we're doing it, Maddox. There'll be a hearing scheduled with the Board of Commissioners. We'll notify you when to appear."

I was standing now. "Listen, you—"

"That's all, Maddox," Janine said curtly. He swiveled in his chair and looked out the window.

"You can turn in your gun and badge with the desk sergeant outside."

All I could do was stand there, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. Then I turned, went to the door and opened it and stepped into the squad room. I slammed the door behind me. I thought for a moment the glass paneling was going to shatter.

The boys were looking at me. "What happened, Pete?" Doug Sales asked.

I wet my lips. "I've been suspended," I said, still not quite believing it. "Indefinitely."

"I told you, Pete," Augie said. "Damn it, I told you you'd gone too far this time."

"They can't do this to me," I said.

"They just did it, didn't they?"

"We'll see," I said grimly. "We'll see about that."

"You want some advice," Augie said, "go shave that beard off, then go back in there and apologize to the lieutenant. Maybe he'll let you off with a reprimand."

"The hell I will," I said. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do."

They were watching me.

"I'm going down to see McKenna at the *Sentinel*," I said. "I'm going to tell him just what happened, and if I know McKenna he'll spread it all over the front page."

"Ouch," Cliff said, shaking his head sadly.

"You stir up a hornet's nest like that, they'll drum you right off the force," Augie said. "You can't fight city hall, Pete!"

"Can't I?" I said.

"Pete . . ."

I went through the squad room and out to the front desk. I gave my gun and badge to a surprised Sergeant Baumann on the desk, and stormed outside.

I was pretty sore. Okay, maybe I *had* gone too far this time, but I was fed to the ears with Lieutenant Janine and his outdated, school-of-hard-knocks methods of running the Detective Squad of the 23rd Precinct. I was fed up with being handed the unimportant and the dirty assignments, and with being made scapegoat for every mistake that happened at the 23rd. I knew the reason for it, but that didn't make it any easier to take.

Janine didn't like me because I had gone to college and the FBI Academy, and because I knew the meaning of words he couldn't even spell. He resented, and perhaps even envied, me for it. He had come up the hard way, and to him a successful assignment was measured by how many cracked heads you could count.

I knew the rest of the boys dis-

liked Janine as much as I did, for various other reasons, but they were too scared of their jobs or too apathetic to do anything about it. Well, I wasn't. I had managed to salve my ego in the past by irritating Janine as much as possible, but this was the final straw. Suspend me, would he? Well, we'd see about that.

Sam McKenna was more than happy to see me when I went to the *Sentinel*. He listened to my story, and when I was finished he clapped me on the back.

"Don't worry, Pete," he said. "We'll see that justice is done. I've been looking for an excuse to blast that lard-head Janine for a long time. It looks like this is it."

The morning edition of the *Sentinel* contained an impassioned attack. McKenna had outdone himself. What was law enforcement in the city coming to, he wrote, when a proven, dedicated young police officer was suspended from duty without pay simply because he decided to grow a beard? Were clean-shaven faces a prerequisite for good police work? The entire episode smacked of the practices of the German SS. He then went on to blister Janine as the Himmler of the 23rd. The entire story was a masterpiece of journalistic muckraking.

I sat at home two days, waiting.

Nothing. Not even a phone call.

Carole, my fiancée, told me on the second day that she wasn't at all sure I shouldn't end my crusade by apologizing and shaving off the beard, even if it did make me look distinguished. After all, she said, I was jeopardizing my career. But I stood fast, even though I was beginning to have some faint misgivings myself. It was the principle, I said. I'd gone this far; it was too late to back out now.

Sam McKenna called me that second night. "Public opinion is running highly in your favor," he told me. "The brass is still standing fast though. The efficiency of the police force is based on discipline, they're saying. Without it, the entire structure of law enforcement will break down. But don't worry, kid, they're beginning to weaken. It's only a matter of time now."

He sounded confident. I wished I were.

On the afternoon of the third day of my suspension, I began to get restless. The waiting was playing on my nerves. I decided I needed some relaxation.

Like most people, I have a hobby. I collect mystery magazines—pulp mostly, from the Thirties and Forties; interesting, and educational too. It had been a while

since I'd had time to indulge my hobby, so this seemed like an excellent opportunity.

There is a used-book store tucked into the basement of a converted brownstone on West Twenty-Eighth, which few people know about and which is usually a fine source of back issues of the pulps. I drove down there, parked in a self-serve lot, and browsed for over an hour. I found a 1939 issue of *Black Mask*, sans cover, in a dusty corner and two issues of *Dime Detective* that I didn't have.

There was a small lunch counter across the street from the book shop, nearly deserted. I went inside, ordered coffee, and sat reading my new acquisitions.

I had just looked up to order a refill when I saw him. He was crossing the street, jaywalking. He had on dark glasses and a black turtleneck sweater, and he wore his hair differently, but I recognized him just the same. His name was Windy South, and he was wanted for murder.

He stopped on the sidewalk outside, glancing around him. Then he looked through the window, into the lunch counter. I stiffened. He was looking right at me.

When I was a patrolman on the East Side, four years ago, I had caught Windy South in the act of burglarizing a jewelry store. It had

been my first major arrest, and had been instrumental in my eventual promotion to Detective/Third. *Damn, I thought, if he recognizes me . . .*

He didn't. The beard had obviously fooled him. He came inside, sat at the upper end of the counter and ordered a sandwich to go. He appeared nervous, but I didn't wonder at that. He had killed a man in a loan company holdup in one of the adjoining

states a week before, and was the subject of a four-state manhunt. The last report we had on him, he was heading for Mexico, which was the opposite direction.

I smiled. An idea was beginning to take shape in my mind. I waited until Windy South had gathered his order and stepped outside. Then I paid for my coffee and stood at the door, watching to see where he would go.

He crossed the street again, and began to walk west. I followed him, staying on the opposite side. I didn't have to follow far. He turned into a low-key hotel, the Chancellor, a block and a half away on West Twenty-Eighth.

I stood in the doorway of a market across the street, pondering my next move. I wished I had my gun. It was certain Windy South would be well-armed.

A sign hanging above a shop a few doors up the street caught my eye then. I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I went up to the shop, made a purchase, then walked across to the Chancellor Hotel. The desk clerk was thin, pale, and had a nose as long as my little finger. He looked like an anemic anteater. I went up to him.

"Police officer," I snapped. "The man with the sunglasses who just came in. What's his room num-



ber? Come on, no stalling."

He looked at me and snickered. "A cop?" he said. "With a beard?"

"Don't get flip, junior," I said. I wrapped my hand in his shirt front. "The room number."

"Okay, okay, take it easy. Two-oh-four, second floor."

I released his shirt. "And stay off the phone."

"Sure," the anteater said. He grinned. "A cop with a beard, huh? It figures."

I went up the stairs to the second floor and found two-oh-four. I put my hand in my pocket and wrapped lightly on the door.

There was silence for a moment, and then Windy South's guttural voice said, "Who is it?"

"Desk clerk," I said, imitating the anteater. "I've come to fix the lamp plug."

"The lamp plug? There ain't nothing the matter with the lamp plug."

"Yes, sir," I said. "The maid noticed it was sparking this morning when she changed the linen."

"Okay, just a minute."

I waited, tensing. The door opened a crack, and Windy's face peered around the jamb. "Hey! You ain't—"

"That's right, I ain't," I said. I put my hand on the door and shoved. He backpedaled into the room. The bed caught him at

the knees and he sat down hard. He started to lunge toward the nightstand.

"Hold it, Windy!" I yelled, and I took my hand out of my pocket. The pistol was small and gray in my fist. "Don't make me put a hole in your fat head."

He froze. His watery eyes fixed on me. "Who the hell are you?"

"Don't you recognize me, Windy?"

He peered. "The guy in the lunchroom."

"Right," I said. "Now try a little harder."

He got it then. "Maddox! Pete Maddox!"

I grinned at him. Then I went over to the nightstand and opened the drawer. The gun inside was a .38 revolver. I put the gray pistol in my pocket and leveled the .38 at him.

He was still staring at me. "You . . . What the hell, you got a beard!"

"You ought to read the papers, Windy," I said. "Very educational."

He shook his head, thinking about that. He wasn't particularly bright, even as criminals go.

I went to the wall phone near the door.

The first person I called was Sam McKenna at the *Sentinel*. "I'm at the Chancellor Hotel on West Twenty-Eighth, room two-

oh-four," I said when he came on. "Get down here on the double. I've got a story you might be interested in."

"Sure, Pete," McKenna said. "What's up?"

"You'll see when you get here," I said. "And, Sam . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Bring a photographer with you."

I called the 23rd then. Augie Canazarro answered. "This is Pete," I said.

Silence for a moment. Then, "What is it, Pete?" guardedly.

I told him where I was. "I've just made an arrest, Augie," I said. "A big collar."

"Arrest?" he said. "Pete—"

"I know," I said. "I'm suspended. But not for long, I suspect."

"Who's the collar?"

"Windy South."

"*What?* Don't move," Augie said. "I'll be right down."

"Bring the lieutenant with you," I told him.

"Janine? Listen, Pete—"

"Just bring him, Augie. I want him in on this." I hung up and settled back to wait.

The timing couldn't have been more perfect. Sam McKenna and his photographer arrived first. I told McKenna exactly what had happened, watching him beam happily, and then told him what I

wanted him to do. He agreed. While we waited, the photographer took several pictures. Windy South seemed bewildered by the whole thing.

Augie and Lieutenant Janine arrived five minutes later. Janine was apoplectic. He came charging through the door, fire in his eyes and brimstone on his lips. He was shouting something about phony heroics, making a one-man arrest without notifying the squad.

Then he saw Sam McKenna. He sputtered and grew silent. There was no love lost between McKenna and Janine, especially after Sam's blast in the *Sentinel*, and Janine knew full well the power of the written word. This was going to make him look bad enough, without enhancing it by hard words toward me—or so he thought.

I went over the story again for Augie and Janine, explaining carefully what had happened.

Janine waited until I had finished before he asked the question I had known he was going to ask. "You said you came up here and put a gun on South, but you turned *your* gun in to the desk sergeant. Where did you get another one?"

I took the gray pistol from my pocket. "I bought one," I said.

"Bought one?" Janine said, a

small smile starting on his mouth. "Without a permit?"

I looked at Sam McKenna, and then I looked at the photographer, who was standing to one side, camera poised. I said, "You don't need a permit to buy this kind of gun, Lieutenant." Then I shot him with it.

Actually, that is not quite correct. What I did was shoot *past* him, just over his left ear. He yelped, backing away, hands up-raised. Augie started forward, and then stopped.

The thin stream of water made a dark stain on the peeling wall-paper behind Janine.

"A water pistoll!" Augie said in disbelief.

I thought Sam McKenna was going to have a stroke, he was laughing so hard.

The story came out in the papers next day. It ran under a bold headline on the front page: **SUSPENDED COP CAPTURES KILLER WITH WATER PISTOL**. There was a picture of me, resplendent in my reddish-black beard, holding Windy South at bay. Beside it, in a true piece of journalistic art, was a picture of Lieutenant Janine, hands held high in front of his face, while the stream of water squirted over his ear from the pistol in my hand. The caption underneath read: *Bearded Pete Maddox shows*

that there is no hard feeling as he demonstrates to lieutenant who suspended him how he captured wanted murderer.

Sam McKenna's story was equally tongue-in-cheek. He made a lot of the fact that if it hadn't been for my beard, Windy South would have recognized me in that lunchroom and escaped into the crowds. Going further than that, he wrote, if I hadn't been suspended for growing the beard in the first place, I never would have been in the lunchroom. Sam also made a few allusions to Janine's capabilities as a police officer.

Naturally, there was quite a reaction. The police department and the Board of Commissioners received numerous letters demanding my immediate reinstatement. Since the public cannot be ignored for reasons of political expediency, my hearing was moved up to the following day after the story broke. The Board, as everyone had known they would, voted unanimously to lift my suspension, allow me full pay for the time I had missed, and return me to duty—with the beard.

I was even to be recommended for a citation for bravery.

As for Lieutenant Janine, he had been two hours on the carpet, getting resoundingly chewed by the chief. The department had been

made to look extremely foolish, not only from my suspension, but from Janine's not exactly flattering portrait in the *Sentinel* and from my single-handed capture of Windy South. For once, Janine was the whipping boy.

All the above was gleefully reported to me by Sam McKenna.

I was not totally satisfied, though. I had hoped that Janine would be busted, perhaps down to detective, or even back to a beat, but Sam told me that was hardly likely on the strength of a single episode such as this one. I should be content, he said, with the results as they stood.

On the day I returned to duty, Janine called me into his office.

"Okay, Maddox," he said. "You're reinstated, with the beard. I don't mind telling you, it wasn't my choice. But there's nothing I can do about it. I don't like it one damned bit, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"All I can say is," I told him sweetly, "It's a pleasure to be back, Lieutenant."

His nose began to get red. "Lis-

ten, Maddox, and listen good. Step out of line just one more time. Just one more. You were damned lucky on this, but the next time—and I'm hoping there is a next time—I'm going to cut you up into little pieces. Do you understand that, Maddox?"

I just grinned at him. I was thinking, *Is that right? Well, all right, you old buzzard, if it's a war you want, I'll be glad to oblige. We'll just see who cuts who into little pieces.*

That night, when I got off duty, I went to a barber shop. There was no one waiting, and I climbed into a chair.

"Yes, sir?" the barber said.

"I'd like a haircut," I said.

"Yes, sir," the barber said. "How do you want it cut?"

"Off," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Off," I repeated. "All off. I want my head shaved."

Then I sat back in the chair, with my arms folded across my chest, a determined smile on my lips, and watched in the mirror while he did just that.



Speculation proffers hope; knowledge is not always so rewarding.



SUICIDE, in our small east Texas town, was considered worse than murder. I suppose that was because most murders, the few we had, were committed in the heat of passion and for a reason, however wrong the reason might have been. But with suicide, well, the reasons for a person taking his own life were more often than not a mystery, known only to the person and his Maker. That was why folks were so horrified when they heard that Wade Ponder had

By Clayton
Matthews

rammed the muzzle of a .22 rifle into his mouth and blown his brains out.

I was more horrified than most. Not because I knew him well—I'd only seen him a half dozen times at the most—but that year, the year Mr. Ponder moved his family to Conroe County, I walked home from school with his daughter, Rita, almost every afternoon. I was a sophomore in high school, Rita a freshman. The Ponders had rented the farmhouse up the road from Sheriff Jason Little's place.

Rita was slender, dark, solemn, with enormous black eyes. Her smile, when it came, was sudden and sweet. There was something about her, not secretiveness so much as a sense of carrying around a secret as heavy as stone. Often we would walk the mile from school without speaking a word.

"I swear there's something strange about that child," Aunt Beth said at supper one evening. "It's like she was born old. Sometimes she comes in here with Kyle for milk and cookies, Jason, and they sit the whole time, the two of them, without saying a word. Then she says a polite little thank you and slips out the door. Don't you two ever *talk*, Kyle?"

"Now leave the boy alone, sis," Sheriff Jason drawled. "I reckon

he's sweet on her. I remember when I was his age, I didn't talk much either when I had a little old girl around grownups."

"Sweet on her! And Kyle hardly out of knee britches!"

"Age ain't little to do with it," Sheriff Jason said. Then he chuckled. "Course I'd say the boy's got a bit of a problem. I thought he had a case on the new teacher, Vera Townes."

I felt my face burn like fire, and I concentrated on my supper.

Aunt Beth wasn't really my aunt, but they'd taken me in to raise after my real aunt died. Sheriff Jason was only a deputy, but he was the only law in our little town and all it needed, most times. He was plump, totally bald. Some folks claimed he never moved fast enough to keep the flies off, but I considered him the smartest man I knew.

Aunt Beth was wrong about Rita never talking. Sometimes a spell would hit her, and she'd talk a blue streak.

On our way out of town from school every day, we passed the filling station. More often than not, Sheriff Jason would be there on an upended box, a group of men gathered around. He didn't have an office; he used the filling station and the pop box instead. As he was fond of saying, ninety-

nine per cent of the town's law problems could be settled right there. Usually the number of men was large. This was the Thirties, you understand, and unemployment was high. As we passed, Sheriff Jason would flap a hand at us, beaming, and go right on talking, black pipe fuming.

One late fall afternoon, the leaves turning brown and gold, Rita and I walked along the river bottom. The pecan trees were dropping nuts, and we hunted the heaped-up leaves for the red-shelled pecans. After we'd collected a goodly number, we sat down with our backs against a fallen log, cracked the pecans with our teeth, and ate the rich nutmeat.

This was one of the times Rita talked freely.

"You know what I want to do, Kyle, when I grow up?"

It was a game you played with the other kids, of course, but Rita had never played it with me. I looked at her intently. Her face wore a dreaming expression, yet it was shaded with melancholy as though her dreams were old and threadbare.

She didn't wait for me to answer. "I'm going to be a singer. I'm going to travel all over and sing on the radio and everywhere." She looked directly at me. "Do you believe me?"

"Sure, Rita," I said quickly. "Sure, I believe you."

A flicker of scorn crossed her face. "No, you don't. But I am. You wait and see."

She closed her eyes tight, tilted her head back, and began to sing. Her voice was clear and true and sweet. I'd heard her sing before, and I liked to listen to her, but her choice of songs always made me uncomfortable. She sang the honky-tonk jukebox songs, songs about hopeless passions, unfaithfulness, dolorous songs of tawdry loves, songs she shouldn't even know. The one she sang this day, "It Makes No Difference Now," told of an unfaithful lover and the one left behind who no longer had anything to live for. I'd heard that the song had brought on a rash of suicides.

Rita finished singing and said, "If you knew how to play the guitar, Kyle, we could travel together, you playing, and me singing."

I was about as musical as a rusty rain barrel, yet I said eagerly, "I could learn, Rita."

Suddenly her face closed up in that way it had, and I doubted she even heard me. In one lithe motion she got to her feet and started off. I had to hurry to catch up with her.

I had yet to meet Anne Ponder,

Rita's mother, having only seen her at a distance. Rita remedied that on this Friday afternoon. She invited me, for the first time, to walk on home with her for milk and cookies. She did it with a flounce, an air of defiance, as though daring me to accept.

Mr. Ponder hadn't rented the farm, only the house. He wasn't a farmer. He was a farm implement salesman and traveled a great deal, which explained why we saw little of him. Nobody could understand why he hadn't rented a house in town.

Sheriff Jason, scorning gossip as always, had said, "I don't see anything wrong with his renting that old house. Run down as it is, it costs less rent than living in town. Besides all that, it's his business."

Rita's mother I judged to be about fifty; later, I learned she was actually under forty. She was very thin and careworn, which wasn't unusual for a farm woman—except she wasn't a farm woman. It was easy to see where Rita got her solemn expression; I never saw her mother smile once. The kitchen was sparsely furnished but clean. The worn wooden floor was still damp from a recent scrubbing.

Mrs. Ponder was busy cooking supper on a wood cookstove, her face flushed with heat. When Rita introduced us, she pushed a strand

of damp graying hair out of her eyes and said, "Howdy, Kyle. Rita has told me about you." Her voice held a complaining note, as though Rita's information only added another burden to an already heavy one.

Her cookies weren't nearly as good as Aunt Beth's. They were sugar cookies, stale, and too sweet; and the milk was store bought, not cow-fresh.

Rita and I sat at the table and ate in our usual silence. Mrs. Ponder moved about with a tired step, also without speaking. I grew more and more uncomfortable and was trying to think of an excuse to get away when I heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

The footsteps came on toward the kitchen, and that was the first time I saw Mr. Ponder up close. He was slender; delicate looking. It was clear where Rita got her dark good looks. He wore a suit, a white shirt and a tie, and was carrying a suitcase. I guess I gaped at him, for the only folks you saw in our part of the country those days wearing a suit and tie on weekdays were schoolteachers and preachers. The only time I'd seen Sheriff Jason in a suit was at a funeral.

Rita's face lit up. "Daddy!"

"Hi, honey. I didn't know you were home from school yet." He

came across to the table and chucked her under the chin, his inquiring gaze on me.

"Daddy, this is Kyle . . ."

"Glad to know you, Kyle." He held out his hand, and I jumped to my feet, gulping.

Mrs. Ponder said, "Ain't you even staying for supper?" The complaining note was stronger in her voice.

He glanced over at her, his face expressionless. "I reckon not, Anne. I have to see somebody over in the next county first thing Saturday morning. It'll take me most of the night to get there as it is."

Mrs. Ponder banged a pan down on the stove. "... never stay home . . . always off . . . should be with his family . . ."

Her face was averted, her voice a mutter, and I only caught the few words, but I guess Mr. Ponder'd heard it all before. He said mildly, "It's the way I make my living, Anne." He glanced at Rita. "See you in a few days, honey."

Rita was looking down at the table. She murmured something I didn't catch. Mr. Ponder's face was shadowed, his eyes brooding. He raised one hand in a half-gesture, then let it fall. He nodded to me and left the room with his suitcase.

Something had changed in the kitchen. Rita didn't look up once, and I saw she was kneading her hands in her lap. Mrs. Ponder banged pots and pans around, her back as stiff as an ironing board.



As soon as I heard Mr. Ponder's car start up and drive away, I bolted the last of my cookie and fled. Neither Rita nor her mother spoke to me as I left.

I reckon Sheriff Jason was right about my being sweet on Rita. He was also right about Miss Townes. She came to town about the same time as the Ponders, maybe a week or so before. Miss Townes was the new English teacher in our school. I was in love with

her from that first day in her sophomore English class. After I got acquainted with Rita two weeks later and started walking her home from school, I was torn between two loves.

Miss Townes was short, pink as a sunrise, with copper-bright hair and a disposition as patient and sweet as any I've ever seen in a schoolteacher. English had always been my worst subject; now I got all A's. Of course I was in love with her. Who wouldn't be? But the ten years difference in our ages put her beyond my reach; I could only worship from afar.

—There were others in our town to whom the age barrier didn't apply. They slicked down their hair, polished their boots, and came at her from all directions. "Like hornets buzzing their dauber nests," Sheriff Jason said. "Not like bees around a honeycomb. Ain't much honey sticking to our boys."

They buzzed to no purpose. She shied away from all of them with a smile and a kind word.

We didn't know much about Miss Townes. Gossip had it that she came to us from a Fort Worth school. Nobody could figure out why she'd picked our backwater community. After the first few weeks of school she took to going away weekends. Nobody knew

where, but it was thought she had folks in Fort Worth she visited. Miss Townes didn't say and passed off any questions with her gentle smile.

That Friday afternoon on the river bottom with Rita put me in bad with Miss Townes. She had assigned us a theme to write over the weekend. In my excitement over what Rita had said, I clean forgot the theme. I mooned around most of Saturday, daydreaming of the time when Rita and I would travel all over, her singing, my playing the guitar. Late Saturday afternoon I found an old guitar, one string missing, in the attic. I fooled around with it up there, plucking at the strings until my fingers were raw. I started in again Sunday morning.

By the middle of the afternoon Sheriff Jason had had enough. He came to the top of the stairs and called up, "For Lord's sake, boy, you're about to drive me right out of my mind with that awful noise! Now you just stop it! What's got into you, anyway?"

Hurt to the quick, I plunged out of the house and gloomed around the river bottom until supper. It wasn't until bedtime that I remembered the theme, and by then it was too late.

I was the only one in my class who didn't turn in a theme. Miss

Townes said in her soft voice, "I'm disappointed in you, Kyle. You'll just have to stay in after school and work on it."

I was unhappy having to tell Rita I couldn't walk her home, but when I was in Miss Townes' classroom after school it wasn't so bad. It was the first time I've ever been alone with her. Needless to say, I got little work done. I sat in the front row and kept glancing up at her behind the big desk. She was busy grading papers and didn't notice, or pretended not to.

After fifteen minutes I began to fidget. Finally I burst out, "Miss Townes . . ."

She looked up, brown eyes intent on me. "Yes, Kyle?"

"I'm sorry about this old theme! I just forgot! I shouldn't have but I did."

After a breathless moment she smiled. "I'm sorry, too, Kyle. But I'm more disappointed than anything. That's why I kept you . . ."

She broke off, her gaze going past me. Her eyes widened, and I saw her bite down hard on her lower lip.

I looked around. Mr. Ponder was striding toward the desk. He swept past me as though I wasn't there. He leaned toward her, his knuckles whitening where he gripped the desk. "Why didn't you show up Friday night?"

Her glance jumped to me, one hand going to her throat. "Please," she whispered, "you shouldn't be here like this!"

"I had to! I had to know! Why didn't you come? Is it something I did?"

"Wade . . . It's not you. At



least nothing you've done. It's us. We can't go on this way." She was looking directly at him now; I was forgotten. "You should never have followed me here from Fort Worth. And when you did, I should never have taken up . . ." She slammed a small fist down on the desk. "But it has to stop! That's why I stayed home Friday."

"You can't mean that, honey.

Not after all we've been through."

He seized her hand, and she snatched it away. "I do mean it! I never meant anything more. If you don't stop, I'll quit my job and go away again. It's all over, Wade. Believe me, it is."

Mr. Ponder stared at her for a long while. She faced him without flinching, head thrown back. Then his shoulders slumped, and he turned away toward the door. He went right past me without a sign of recognition.

Miss Townes stood looking after him long after the door had slammed behind him. I made a small sound in my throat. She started and glanced at me, her eyes misted with tears. "Oh, Kyle!" She gestured. "You run on home. Go on now."

I went with dragging feet.

The next afternoon I left Rita at the yard gate to her house and trudged on toward home. We'd had even less to say than usual. I'd desperately wanted to tell her about what I'd overheard the day before, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was about fifty yards away from the house when I heard the shot. I ran back at full speed. As I started up the porch steps, Rita pushed through the screen door and hurried to meet me. Her eyes were very dark, her face very white, yet she was per-

fectly composed when she spoke.

"No, Kyle, don't come in. Run home and fetch Sheriff Jason. Tell him to please hurry."

By the time I came back with Sheriff Jason, a crowd had collected in the front yard, but not a soul ventured beyond the porch.

"You stay out here, Kyle," Sheriff Jason said sharply, and he hurried inside.

Questions flew at me, none of which I answered. Of course, all I knew was that a shot had been fired inside, but I sensed that something terrible had happened. It was close to a half-hour before Sheriff Jason came back outside. He ordered one of the men to go into town and phone the sheriff and the undertaker over at the county seat. He refused to answer any questions and told everybody to go home. Grumbling, they began drifting away. I hung back, hoping for a glimpse of Rita, but he saw me and called out sternly, "You go on home, too, Kyle. Go on now. Tell Beth I'll be late for supper."

At home I told Aunt Beth all I knew. We waited supper for him, but it was long after dark when Sheriff Jason let himself in the back door, looking bone tired and very solemn. I'm sure it cost Aunt Beth a great deal of will power, but she didn't ask a question until

we were seated around the supper table. Then she said, "Well, Jason?"

Sheriff Jason sighed, scrubbed a hand down across his face, and told us. He had found Mr. Ponder in an upstairs bedroom. He had been fully clothed, lying on his back on the bed, a single shot .22 rifle by his right hand. The bullet had gone through the roof of his mouth and into his brain. Rita and Mrs. Ponder had been of very little help. Rita said she had been barely inside the house when the shot sounded, and her mother said she had been in the kitchen.

"Killed himself!" Aunt Beth clucked. "Now why would he do a thing like that?"

Sheriff Jason didn't look at her. "Nobody seems to know."

"Suicide . . . The last time somebody killed himself around here was way back when I was a little girl."

He growled, "You'd like it better if he was murdered?"

"Well, then at least we'd know . . ." She bit the words off.

"Know what, woman? A man's lying dead. I can't see it matters a great deal why."

"It matters to me! And it'll matter to other folks, too, you wait and see!"

She was right in that. It seemed to matter to a lot of folks. Oh, nothing was said until after the

funeral. Practically the whole town turned out, mostly from curiosity, I reckon, since the Ponders were too new to be well-known. It was a fitting day for a funeral, gray and somber, with dripping skies. Mrs. Ponder was in a state of near collapse, leaning on Rita's arm, with Sheriff Jason supporting her on the other side. Miss Townes was there, wearing black, and standing off by herself. She was pale and drawn, yet she didn't shed a tear that I could see. She left before the first clod of wet dirt hit the coffin, and I never saw her again. I later learned that she had resigned her job even before the funeral.

Two days later I was walking past the filling station and saw several men bunched around Sheriff Jason. I was alone; Rita hadn't yet returned to school. I edged in close and listened.

"Why'd he do it, Jason?"

"I ain't the least idea. Who knows about a thing like that?"

"Weren't nothing wrong with his health, was there?"

"Not that I know of, but then I wasn't his doctor."

"Ain't right, a man like that killing himself. Not too old, healthy, with a family to take care of, and a man with the ladies, too, the way I hear it."

Sheriff Jason loosed an exasper-

ated snort. "So what would you all have me do?"

"We don't know. Something, that's for sure. You're the sheriff, ain't you?"

"I reckon I am," Sheriff Jason said dryly. "Leastways, everybody keeps telling me I am, times like this."

They kept at him and kept at him for the next few days, but it didn't seem to bother him too much. Aunt Beth was as bad as the others. She was at him every day. At supper one night she said, "It's been a week now and you're no closer to knowing why that man killed himself. Are you, Jason?"

"I reckon not, sis," he drawled. "But I also reckon it'll come out in the wash."

"You always say that!" She slammed his supper plate down in front of him. "You make me *so* mad!"

A soft knock sounded on the kitchen door. Aunt Beth bustled over and admitted Rita and her mother. It was the first time I'd seen Rita since the funeral.

She had her mother by the arm and marched her right up to the table. "Sheriff Jason . . . Mama has something to say to you."

Sheriff Jason sighed. "Yes, I've been expecting you . . . Both of you." He got to his feet and

pulled out a chair. He said gently, "All right, Mrs. Ponder, tell it in your own way. Just take your time."

Mrs. Ponder looked as though she hadn't eaten since the funeral. It didn't seem possible, as thin as she had been, but she must have lost ten pounds. The skin on her face was drawn tight across her cheekbones, and her eyes were sunken and had a dull look. She placed both hands flat on the table and talked in a voice so low I had to strain to hear her.

"He was going away with . . . with her. He was leaving me . . . leaving his family. A man shouldn't do that. I put up with his running around. I came along when he followed her here. I guess a person can just take so much." All of a sudden her eyes flooded with pain, then went dead again. "I told him I wouldn't stand for it. He laughed at me. He said I'd stand for anything he wanted me to. I waited until he lay down for a nap. Then I put that old .22 in his mouth and pulled the trigger." Her glance moved to Sheriff Jason's face. "And that's all, Sheriff. That's the way it happened. Rita said I should come tell you."

"Yes, Mrs. Ponder, it's better you did." He got up and walked over to Aunt Beth, who had been listening dazedly. He said softly, "Well,

sis, you surely got your killing."

She started. "But I didn't want . . . You *knew*! You knew all the time!"

"I didn't know. I thought she had killed him, yes, but I hadn't a prayer of proving anything. I figured she'd come to me in due time, or the girl would see that she did."

Rita was standing beside her mother, holding her hand in a tight grip. Mrs. Ponder was staring straight ahead into nothing.

Sheriff Jason crossed to them. In the gentlest voice I'd ever heard him use he said, "You'll have to come along with me, Mrs. Ponder. You, honey, you'd better spend the night here. Beth'll fix you up a place to sleep."

Rita's head went back. "No, Sheriff Jason, I'll go along home."

He studied her for a moment, then he turned to lead Mrs. Ponder out. Rita and I followed them into the back yard and watched as he put Mrs. Ponder into the Model A and drove off.

Rita started away without a word to me.

"Rita . . ." She paused without looking at me. "What about our plans?"

"Our plans?"

"What we were talking about on the river bottom. About when we grow up."

She faced me. "What difference does all that make now, Kyle?" Her eyes blazed, and her voice burned. "What difference now?"

She turned and walked away, walked out of the light and into the darkness.

That was the last time I saw her. Two days later she went out to Abilene to live with an aunt and uncle, but sometimes on chill fall afternoons, walking alone on the river bottom, I would stop, head cocked, sure I could hear the clear sweet run of her voice.

When I, finally, grew up and would be in a bar or a restaurant, and a new record, a new female vocalist, would start up on the jukebox, a soft-stringed guitar providing background music, I would hurry to check on the name of the singer, certain it was Rita—but it never was.



"Beware, as long as you live, of judging people by appearances."



He eased the bag to the sidewalk with a grunt of relief, and for a moment stood glancing about uncertainly while gulping the cool, damp air of his newly won freedom. It was exhilarating to be divorced from the tight wedlock of the navy, but the feeling was mixed with confusion and loss. For two years they told you exactly what to do and how to do it by the book,

LATE in the afternoon, under a misty dome of San Francisco fog, Seaman Wallace Dunbar descended awkwardly from the Treasure Island bus. Trim in his dress uniform, having just been "separated" from the navy, he carried the sum total of his service possessions slung over his shoulder in a seabag weighing close to fifty pounds.



By
Robert Colby

while surrounded by some pretty close buddies in the same boat.

Suddenly they turned you loose in a strange city a couple of thousand miles from a place called home and a way of life you weren't quite ready to embrace—not until you got the kinks of confinement out of your system with one or two free-wheeling days of transition in this exotic city, the very name of which had always held a kind of magic.

Your wallet was fat with the cash of accumulated pay, and your winnings from a recent month of poker games—in all, eleven hundred bucks you would exchange on Monday for traveler's checks. To this add unlimited and undisciplined time and you had it made—except that now you were alone at the edge of Friday evening and did not know where to look for a girl of the sort you did not find in the Philippines.

Seaman Wally Dunbar, twenty-three, was a radioman who had, after six months of training, been deposited during his year and a half of overseas duty at Subic Naval Station in the Philippines. Though there had been some self-made highlights of excitement, it had been largely a dull and lonely tour of duty, as routine and familiar as his morning face in the shaving mirror.

There had been plenty of passes to the nearby town, which was almost within howling distance of the base. It was a small, shack-strewn, honky-tonk city which shamelessly boasted some four hundred bars, was in fact one great chain of squalid dens connected by crumbling, mud-mottled streets. Attached to the bars, as fixed as shabby mannequins in tired store windows, were close to two thousand mocha-skinned B-girls who wore paid smiles and said things like, "Hey, Joe, I love you—no bull! Buy me drink?"

In the beginning, Wally Dunbar had been amused and even a bit fascinated by the girls who provided instant companionship—while the pesos lasted. Yet he was not shallow. When he found that even those who had a fair understanding of English were only vacuous dolls who were about as deeply responsive and spontaneous as language-lesson recordings, he quickly lost interest.

After his pockets had been picked, his watch literally torn from his wrist by a street kid on the run, even his navy-issue raincoat lifted, he gave up in disgust. He rejected the passes, no longer went to town. Remaining in barracks, he dozed on his "rack", wrote letters, read, or played endless rounds of stud poker, at which

he was a pretty consistent winner. Time thus crept toward his moment of release in this city of the Golden Gate to freedom.

On a night's leave from the separation center at Treasure Island, Wally had frequented a few bars along the Strip, but now he was in no mood for commercial entertainment or B-girls, nothing at all which had that Philippine flavor of pumped-up joy and counterfeit affection at a dollar a smile.

Rather, he hungered for a simple, uncomplicated American girl who wanted nothing more than to spend a simple, uncomplicated American evening with Wally Dunbar. The cost of the evening, with eleven hundred bucks on the hip, was of no importance. That is, within reasonable bounds it didn't matter how much was spent, just so long as the expense was never a bargaining point, a condition of friendship.

Having formed an attitude, but only the vaguest plan of action, Wally Dunbar, a middle-tall, middle-sized young man who was altogether undistinguished in the physical sense, hailed a cab, hoisted his seabag to the seat beside him, and ordered the driver to take him to one of the better hotels in a "nice, quiet section of town."

The hotel, sprouting, like most

everything else in the city, from a rising hill, was tall and imposing. Its formidable, gray-stone exterior had a look of long-established dignity. The solemn-faced doorman neither snickered nor sneered when Wally alighted beneath the marquee, a Santa Claus of a gob with a bulging seabag in tow. On the contrary, the doorman graciously carried the bag to the rim of the lobby, where a bellhop continued it on its ponderous way to the desk.

Signing himself into a twenty-dollar-a-day room, Wally was carried aloft to the fourteenth floor. The bellhop, who was not much taller than the seabag and half as wide, wrestled it into the room and departed with a handsome tip.

Poised at a window, Wally sighed happily while inspecting an awesome view of the city, the darkening bay in the distance beyond, gracefully spanned by the Golden Gate Bridge. He was at last back in the states where most people treated you like a human being, where most girls did not look upon you as purely a money tree to be stripped clean and then deserted until you grew another batch of Uncle's green.

The thought gave him a secure feeling, a warmth for everything American. Still, as he lighted a cigarette and tried to conjure a de-

lightful picture of the evening ahead, he could not project himself beyond dinner.

Rick Endicott, a fast buddy acquired at Subic, was visiting with a cousin in Oakland. They would meet at five next afternoon, on the Top of the Mark. Meanwhile, what—?

Probed by the cool finger of loneliness, Wally turned from the window in search of the phone. He called his mother long-distance, then, somewhat cheered, took a lazy, luxurious bath, shaved and went below to the dining room.

Shortly after dinner, an odd little incident took place in the lobby, and that was when he met the girl. He had thought that he might begin the evening by taking in a movie, and for that reason he was at the newsstand, buying a paper. There was a light tap on his shoulder, and when he turned his head, the girl was standing there.

She was a petite, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl in her twenties. Her small features were pert, if not pretty, she had long lashes and pale, flawless skin. She was dressed rather primly in a gray, tailored suit.

The moment she looked into his face, her mouth sprang open and she winced, recoiling with embarrassment.

"Oh, excuse me!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were—someone else. From the back you looked exactly like another sailor I know, a friend of my brother's."

As she began to turn away, he dug feverishly for something witty to keep her in conversation.

"Sorry about that," he quipped. "From the back we all look alike in uniform."

"Yes," she said, "that's so true." Her face had closed and she seemed a bird already on the wing.

"Even from the front," he continued hastily, "you can't tell one from the other without a program."

She smiled then. The smile gave her face a look of guileless charm. Still, she said nothing to encourage him.

"I hope you won't think I'm corny," he went on, closing the gap of silence as if it might swallow her, "but it's great to meet a nice, wholesome, American girl."

"How sweet. And thank you."

"I just got back from the Philippines and the sort of gal a sailor meets over there—well, you know what I mean . . ."

"My brother is stationed in Hawaii," she said. "He's in the navy too. He's a petty officer, third class."

Though this was only a rank above his own, he tried to look



properly impressed, but he didn't want to talk about the navy. At heart, he was already a civilian.

"He'll be calling me from Hawaii in a couple of hours," she

was saying. "He phones every Friday night at nine, seven o'clock their time. It must cost him a fortune. But he hasn't much else to spend his money on and we're

very close, always have been."

"I suppose you're married," he said abruptly.

"No, do I look married?"

"It was a loaded question," he said honestly, and grinned.

"Well, I'm not married, I'm just a plain, ordinary working girl."

"A working girl, maybe. But not the rest of it. Are you a secretary?" People were milling about the stand and they had moved to one side.

"No, I—I work here—in the hotel beauty parlor. I was just on my way home."

He nodded. The little ball of certainty had rolled into the winning slot and he felt the timing was right. "How about a drink, then? Just one for the road."

She glanced at her watch. "I don't have an awful lot of time, but—"

"Plans for the evening?"

"Nothing special, no. But I'll have to be home at nine for that call from Hawaii. My brother, remember?"

"Sure, I remember."

"It takes a while on the bus."

"Yeah, but in a taxi, maybe only a few minutes. I'll see that you get there with time to spare."

She beamed at him and he began to guide her toward the hotel bar, exchanging names. Hers was Gloria Baxter.

"Now that you're out of the service, how long will you be in town?" she asked over a third drink. "This isn't your home, is it?"

"No, I live in St. Louis. I'll only be here a day or two at the most. Got a plane ticket. Special rate for the military, you know."

"I know." Her wide eyes fastened upon him, then the lids lowered shyly. "Guess you've got a girl back there in St. Louis."

"Nope. I wasn't six months in the Philippines when she got married. My father's dead, there's only my mother now."

"Too bad. About your girl, I mean."

"Well, that's the way it goes, Gloria. Except for Mom, there's no reason for me to hurry home. But it's lonely in a strange city and sooner or later the ol' bankroll will thin out and I'll need a job."

"A city doesn't have to be lonely or strange, Wally," she offered. "Not when you know someone, a friend to guide you about."

"Is that a promise?"

She chuckled. "That's a promise, Wally. And now I really must go, if you don't mind."

Crossing town in the taxi, he began to talk freely about himself. In the drink-widened expanse of his mind she was already his girl; he would not go home except for

a visit, he would remain and make a new life for himself. Maybe something deep and lasting would develop between them. In any case, he would not be lonely.

It was a white stucco building of three stories on a narrow, climbing side street. She had suggested fixing him a drink while she waited for the call, after which, since she did not have to work on Saturday, she had agreed to help him celebrate his release from the navy with a tour of the city's most exciting night spots.

Her second-floor apartment was neatly, though sparingly furnished in early American, frail, feminine pieces with bright splashes of color. It seemed a cozy, cheerful atmosphere and he sank onto the sofa with the feeling that he already belonged.

"The phone is in the bedroom," she explained, "so I'll just crack the door enough to hear it, then I'll make us a drink."

She went away but in a couple of minutes returned with tall highballs. "I don't have anything but bourbon and ginger," she apologized. "Will that do?"

"Why not? Another cocktail and I'd forget my name."

"Long as you don't forget mine, Wally."

"He took the glass from her and sipped. "How could you forget a

name like Gloria Baxter? Sounds like a movie star." He twirled the ice in the glass and drank deeply. "But I wouldn't like you if you were a movie star, Gloria. I'm just a plain guy and I like plain, uncomplicated girls. Know what I mean? *Real* people."

"A nice, wholesome American girl?" Her winged eyebrows ascended as she settled herself at the other end of the sofa.

"That's it," he answered. "Cornball or not, that's just what I'm trying to say. You spend a year or so on the other side of that ocean and you come home a square. I'm not ashamed of it—I'll drink to it."

He lifted his glass, they drank in unison.

He said a few other things after that, but later he could not remember them. He could remember only the faintly mocking twist of her smile as she toasted his approval of her.

It was morning. At least, a pale light seeped through the panes of an uncurtained window. He lay sprawled upon the uncarpeted floor of a small, perfectly barren room. It was the general size of a bedroom, and there were a couple of closets, but there were no other clues to its intended purpose. There was not a stick of furniture, not

so much as a scrap of debris to give the room a name.

Wally was not alone. Draped about the floor, in deep slumber and in a variety of unlikely postures for sleep, were two sailors and a marine sergeant. That the trio of their snores did not awaken them was a round of discordant applause in praise of Gloria Baxter's secret formula for hypnotic drinks.

Wally awoke with a sense of absolute disorientation, but, forgetting the foul taste in his mouth, he suffered no painful effect. His head felt weightless as a balloon but did not throb or ache. Also, his mind was lucid enough. He could, up to a point, remember word-for-word, action-for-action, the entire charade of the previous night.

Glancing about, he decided at once that he shouldn't even bother to hunt for his wallet, but there it was in his hip pocket. Not only that, it contained cash—four one dollar bills. She—they?—had, with big hearts, left him just enough for carfare and a deluxe breakfast.

If he had then been in possession of his eleven hundred, he would have been willing to bet all of it that his hapless companions, those staggered victims of a long, astonishing night of plunder, would not find their slenderized wallets in much better shape.

Looking out from that second floor window, Wally was quite certain that he was in the same building on the same street where the cab had deposited him with—Gloria Baxter? Well, that was at least a wiser choice than Liz Taylor.

Yet, when he stumbled into what had to be the livingroom, it was also naked, desolate. The bright, cozy furnishings were gone. In the kitchen there was only an ancient refrigerator.

He went out the front door and down the steps to the street. He came back thoughtfully, taking his bearings. Yes, the same building, same apartment. It was a clever scheme, skillfully executed. Although he could not guess the small details, he now felt that he understood how it must have been done.

A series of violent shakes and slaps failed to awaken the others. "Dream on, suckers," he muttered, "you got a surprise coming." He went out and down the stairs again. Pausing before a door designated, "Manager," he beat upon it loudly.

A chesty, tousle-haired man, his eyes puffy with sleep, appeared in a faded robe and slippers. "Beat it!" he growled. "You got a nerve, this hour of the morning!"

When Wally explained that the

police would be right behind him, the manager agreed to tell what he knew about apartment 2B. It had been rented by a man from Los Angeles who had paid up the entire year's lease. He had intended to use it as a place to hang his hat during frequent business trips to San Francisco. However, he had not been seen since and a letter mailed to him was returned. The man had moved without leaving a forwarding.

Furniture? No, all the apartments were rented unfurnished and not a single piece had been delivered for installation in 2B.

Wally smiled a secret smile and went away. It was a good story and doubtless the manager would be able to prove it with legal documents. At least Wally now had a better picture of the way the game was played and he was going to get his eleven hundred back, one way or the other.

His plan did not include the police, but it would be interesting, if not profitable, to check their reaction. He flagged a passing patrol car.

"You fell for one of the oldest gags on the books," the cop told him. "Hard-boiled dames with sweet-kid faces are cleaning the military all over town."

"Why don't you put a stop to it?"

"We try, fella, we try. We catch a few amateurs but the real pros are too slick. They only take the boys in transit to their home towns, the ones who can't or won't hang around long enough to appear in court, even if we could find these hustlers and bring them in."

"I won't kid you, sailor, you got about one chance in a thousand of getting your dough back—what's left of it."

The cop filled out a report and promised an investigation. He shook his head woefully when Wally said he was just another gob separated from service, pausing for a night or two on the town before flying home.

Shortly after five on the following afternoon, Wally was peering down from a window seat at the Top of the Mark.

"... So when I got a peek at this manager and heard his phony tale," he related to his navy pal, Rick Endicott, "I had the whole score figured. The manager is in on the deal and gets a nice fat cut. The minute the girl has her sucker doped off into dreamland, she lifts his cash, then goes down and raps on the manager's door. This character goes up with her and they move the poor stiff into an empty bedroom. It doesn't have to be furnished since the mark never gets

to see it until he finally wakes up.

"And that's not until morning, because they give all these boobies like me a mixture that would wipe out an elephant. So now the road is clear for the next victim, and how long does it take a gal with any looks to con some half-boozed squid up to her pad?"

"About ten minutes," said Rick, a rangy, fun-loving sailor from Fort Worth. He grinned. "But when they've got all those crazy squids in the bag, what do they do with the furniture?"

"Well, what else *could* they do with it if they didn't just haul it right into an empty next door, saved for the gag? Pick up a few light pieces in the livingroom, roll up the rug, pull down the flimsy curtains—a fifteen minute job at most."

"Yeah, but why bother? Why not leave it?"

"Because it might help to confuse some guys. They might think they were in another building, another pad. But try this for size: you're a squid who's just been rolled for his full head of cabbage and you wake up in this joint, everything gone but the furniture. What do you do?"

"I find something heavy and I bust the furniture into kindling wood. Then I make a neat pile in the corner of the room and I burn

the lot, every blasted piece."

Wally chuckled. "Any other questions?"

"Yeah, how come they never get caught? Suppose some guy goes back the next night and waits around to collect his dough or his pound of flesh?"

"He collects a little fresh air, and that's all, buddy, that's all. I'll bet twenty to one they don't use the gimmick more than two or three times a month. They wouldn't dare chance it, though they might have other pads in other buildings if it's a big, organized con game. Regardless, one play like last night's could net three or four grand."

He paused. "That phony Gloria with her phony call from her phony squid brother in Hawaii—she had me in the palm of her hand, eating my heart out. Some night, somewhere, I'm gonna catch up with her. And then I'll squeeze her till she coughs up eleven hundred bucks—with interest!"

"Oh man, I can't wait for that scene. Meantime, I'm staying on here to take the takers. I'm gonna dangle myself all over town as human bait—a nice juicy, innocent squid on the hook with a big roll in his pocket, just ready to be gobbled up."

"And when they take the bait, I'm gonna catch a whole mess of

Glorias with overstuffed purses full of navy-issue cash. All that cash is gonna wind up in my pocket, and then you'll hear me laughing all the way to St. Lou."

"Sounds like a real kick," Endicott said. "What do you plan to use for bait? I mean, you got to show at least a Philadelphia roll—stack of ones wrapped in a couple of hundreds, maybe."

"That's where you come in, Ricky-boy. You supply the green and you'll get it all back, with a neat profit. Anything over my eleven hundred, we split right down the middle. How does that grab you?"

"It grabs me right where I live—in my wallet. Do you do all the dirty work?"

"With pleasure, Rick. With pleasure!"

Rick was thoughtful. "You got a deal," he said, and reached for his money.

About ten o'clock that same Saturday night, in a crowded Strip bar, Wally set his bait and soon hooked a big one. She sat down beside him and coyly pretended indifference while he played it a little drunk and loudly demanded a drink, peeling a hundred from his dollar-padded roll, telling the complaining bartender he didn't have anything smaller, but hell, if

it was any big problem, he would buy a round for the entire house.

After a while she couldn't seem to locate a match for her cigarette and when he produced his lighter, she found her personality and turned it on full-smile. She said her name was Sheila Marshall. He gave her the treatment, dropping the plan that he was flying home in the morning, had the ticket in his pocket.

The way she got him to her apartment was even more transparent. She ordered a tall rum drink mixed with sticky cola, then suddenly made a nervous gesture and spilled the entire mess into her lap.

"It won't take a minute," she said when she returned from the Powder Room. "We'll run over to my place—it's practically around the corner. I'll do a fast change and we'll be on our way again. Okay?"

He was a bit worried when he got a look at her furniture; that is, he was really bleeding for the guy who had to move it. The aging junk was built in the days of bulging, solid-wood construction, supporting massive chairs and giant sofas.

He sat down comfortably and waited for the play to begin. The curtain rose immediately when she came out of the kitchen with a

couple of long ones, offering him the glass which seemed to contain a darker liquid.

Stalling with the lighting of a cigarette, he set the glass on a table beside him. "Listen, while I get on the good side of this drink, why don't you hop into a fresh rag?"

"Well sure." She crossed her long legs and adjusted her skirt. "You in a hurry?"

"Bet I am, baby! We got a lotta livin' to do yet. I came eighteen months and ten thousand miles for this night. I got ten yards of lettuce and I'm gonna spread at least a yard all over town. So hop to, sugar. Go-go-go!"

"Well, all right, then," she said obediently. Standing, she put down her drink and went off to another room. Was it empty, but for a dress in a closet?"

He got up quickly and switched the drinks. He was about to return to his chair when he noticed her pocketbook, left on the coffee table. *Why not?* he thought, and opened it.

He found a billfold jam-packed with currency. *Why not?* he thought again. Taking the bills, he began a hasty count.

Sensing a presence, he glanced up. She was standing there, framed in the doorway, eyeing him coolly.

"I forgot my purse," she was

saying. "I see that you were about to bring it to me. How thoughtful—darling."

Rocked off balance for a moment, he groped for a sharp reply.

"I don't understand," she said, her face truly puzzled. "It's not as if you were broke and there was nothing left for you but to steal my money. If you were hard-up, I'd be the first one to let you have a few bucks. What kind of a guy are you, anyway? Really, I should call the police. That's just what I should do!"

"Be my guest," he said, the bitterness and boldness flooding back to him. "Call the police. And while we're waiting for them, we'll have a little drink. You're gonna drink from *my* glass, and I'm gonna drink from yours. By the time the cops get here, you'll be fast asleep. They'll carry you down like a rag doll and drive you to the station where they'll put you beddy-bye in a nice, cozy cell."

"Sorry," she said frigidly, "I don't get the joke. Is there supposed to be something wrong with the drink I made for you?"

"Nothing wrong with it, sister. Not if you like knockout drops in your whiskey."

"I see. And which was your glass?" she said evenly.

"This one." He extended it toward her.

She took it from him and with some effort and much swallowing, got all of the drink down her throat. Then she sat calmly and studied him.

"How long is it supposed to take?" she asked bitingly. "Ten minutes? Twenty?" She glanced at her watch. "If I should fall asleep, then I want you to keep the money as a gift. If I don't, then I'll call the police. Fair enough?"

He sat in moody silence for a time, then got up and returned the bills to her purse. "I'm sorry, Sheila," he said, "I'm terribly sorry. It was a mistake. Let me tell you what they did to me last night and I think you'll see this in another light."

She listened patiently as he unfolded the complete story, including his plan to bait the con-girls with his Philadelphia roll.

For a long moment she was grave and pensive, then she smiled a sad little smile. "Well, I *do* understand," she said. "And I can see how you might think of me as one of those—B-girls. Would you like to know how I happened to be in that bar, for the first time in my life really looking for a pickup?"

"Well, yeah, I am a bit curious."

"You see, I had a date with a guy I liked in a big way. He's a cruel kind of man, but fascinating

too. He was to meet me in the bar at nine. When an hour passed and he didn't show, I knew he wasn't coming. So I worked myself into this reckless, go-to-hell frame of mind, and when you came along, well, you seemed like just the right medicine for my wound."

He smiled. "What do you say we limp out and salve our wounds together?"

"On one condition," she replied, aiming a finger. "That you hold onto your—what do you call it?—your Philadelphia bankroll. The party's on me. I make a good salary and I just got my yearly bonus, so I can afford it."

"You're a real sport, Sheila, you really are! You're the first decent girl I've met in a year and a half. No kidding!"

"I'll have to change now," she said in a voice that seemed to quake on the brink of tears, and hurried from the room.

Sheila Marshall, better known in certain limited circles as Maggie McCleskey, pulled on a clean dress and restored her makeup in the mirror. This done, she took a sheet of paper from a drawer, scribbled a few words across it and secured it to a weight which was kept for just such an emergency. At the rear window, she signaled with a pocket flash, then carefully tossed the weight below.

It landed beside a sedan on the shadowy parking apron behind the old, converted house.

The note read: *Pass this one up! I think he's a cop and it could be a trap!*

That was about the only kind of warning you could use to stop big Buck Novak, hiding in the car since she phoned him. He was primed to clobber the next gob of the night with a sap after she led him down the back steps, having told him as prearranged, "My girlfriend gave me the key to her car and said I could borrow it while she's away for the weekend. So, honey, why spend your money on a taxi?"

Buck would lump a cash-heavy sailor to sleep, then drive him down to a deserted area near the bay and heave him out. If he ever

did find his way back, Buck, not Maggie, would be waiting in *his* apartment, acting dumb or iron-fisted, as the case required.

Buck was a hard man, no heart at all. But every now and then, Maggie discovered within herself that small, tender spot which tonight the bad-luck sailor had touched. He had, in fact, said one kind thing about her which, however undeserved, had nearly made her cry. For herself, as well as the sailor, she did not want to spoil the illusion.

When they had left the building and were out of sight, she took his arm and fell happily into step. Smiling down at her, Wally told himself that after all, there was, in the city of San Francisco, at least one nice, wholesome, American girl.

IF YOU PLAN TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS

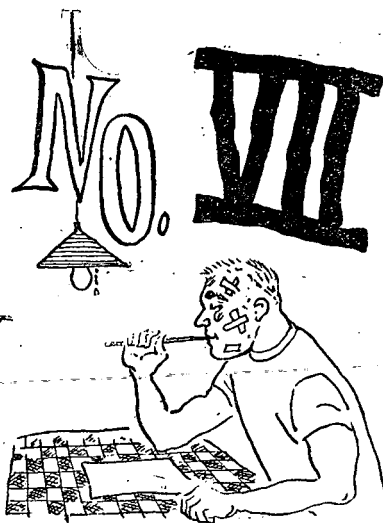
PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE SO THAT WE WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE THE CHANGE ON OUR LISTS IN TIME TO AVOID SENDING ANOTHER COPY TO THE OLD ADDRESS, THUS CAUSING YOUR COPY TO BE DELAYED AND ALSO COSTING YOU A FORWARDING CHARGE. WHEN YOU NOTIFY US OF YOUR CHANGE OF ADDRESS BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD ADDRESS AND YOUR NEW ADDRESS. FOR YOUR OLD ADDRESS YOU COULD SEND US THE ADDRESS LABEL FROM A RECENT ISSUE WRAPPER CLIPPED TO A CARD OR NOTE BEARING THE NEW ADDRESS. ADDRESS CHANGES RECEIVED PRIOR TO THE 10TH OF THE MONTH WILL INSURE DELIVERY OF THE NEXT ISSUE TO YOUR NEW HOME BY THE 10TH OF THE FOLLOWING MONTH. WRITE TO:

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

2441 BEACH COURT, RIVIERA BEACH, FLORIDA 33404

Allegedly, still waters run deep but ingenuity often provides an excellent bridge.

HERMAN GETZNER, sitting at the kitchen table of his small bachelor apartment, yawned and ran a big hand through his bristly, straw-colored hair. His mild blue eyes focused absently on the checked



tablecloth before him, and he yawned again. Herman was tired. He had been thinking hard all evening about a problem he had and now, in spite of his mental efforts, the problem was still unsolved. Herman needed \$975.00 and he could think of no way to get it. His present cash wealth was \$25.00.

Herman still was not clear on how he happened to owe Mr. Ace Powers the sum of \$1,000.00, but

evidently he did. Mr. Powers had ten \$100.00 I.O.U.'s to prove it, and Herman admitted that the signature on each was his own.

It had all happened on Saturday night exactly one week ago. He had gone to the Nightingale Club

By *Harold Rolseth*

for dinner to celebrate his twenty-ninth birthday. He had selected the Nightingale Club because he had heard his boss mention it, and he had gone alone because he did not feel he could afford to invite anyone along. The eighty dollars a week he earned at the Pinecrest Nursery, planting and transplanting flowers and trees, did not go far since each month he sent home sixty dollars to his mother in Minneapolis. His mother used a portion of this amount to supplement her social security income, and with the rest she made payments on a five-acre plot of land not far out of the city. Some day Herman hoped to own a nursery of his own.

He had enjoyed his dinner at the Nightingale Club and was pleased when the proprietor, Ace Powers, had come to his table and introduced himself. When Mr. Powers learned that Herman was celebrating his birthday, he had become extremely cordial. He had refused to permit Herman to pay for his dinner and had insisted that Herman accompany him upstairs to a private lounge where he would meet some very fine gentlemen.

Herman could dimly recall entering a room heavy with smoke and filled with men seated about round, green-covered tables. He

had been handed a large glass of some beverage and led to one of the tables. He could recall nothing after that.

He had awakened the following morning on his own bed, fully dressed, and with a splitting headache. The twenty dollars that was in his wallet the night before was gone.

That evening, while still nursing his headache, a Mr. Frenchie Barbour and a Mr. Tubby Schwartz, representatives of Mr. Powers, had called on him. They had shown him his I.O.U. slips, and Mr. Barbour had explained, "You had lousy cards all evening, fella. Right, Tubby?"

"Right," Tubby had responded.

Vainly Herman had tried to explain that he did not have \$1,000 at the present moment. He could have saved his breath.

"Ace allows one week for payment. That's next Saturday night. Have the money ready. How you get it is your own business." Mr. Barbour had punctuated his words with a series of jabs in Herman's stomach with his finger. "Right, Tubby?" he concluded.

"Right," Tubby had agreed.

During the week Herman came to the conclusion that neither of his two visitors were nice men. Reluctantly he admitted to himself that they looked very much

like the gangsters he had seen in various movies, Mr. Barbour with his narrow, carefully trimmed mustache and striped suit, and Mr. Schwartz with his puffy features and burly shoulders. He wondered whether Mr. Powers knew that his employees were rude and ill-mannered.

Now it was Saturday night, actually Sunday morning, and they would be here any minute. The best Herman could offer them would be a down payment of twenty-five dollars and ten dollars each week until the debt was paid. The thought of evading payment did not enter Herman's mind. He met all his obligations with scrupulous honesty. The fact that he could not recall the circumstances under which this one had been incurred did not excuse him. He had been a fool to get drunk and gamble. Now he must pay for his folly.

Perhaps if he made some coffee the three of them could sit down at the table and talk things over. He set about making the coffee and had just plugged in the pot when the door opened and Mr. Barbour and Mr. Schwartz walked in.

"Well, fella, how about the money?" Mr. Barbour asked.

"Look, Mr. Barbour," said Herman, "let's all sit down and have

some coffee, and maybe we can work things out?"

Mr. Barbour's small eyes became slits. "You mean you ain't got the money, fella?"

Herman dug into his pocket. "I've got twenty-five dollars here, and I thought maybe we could work out some plan . . ."

Mr. Barbour turned to Mr. Schwartz. "The fella says he's got twenty-five dollars. Do you think Ace would settle for this?"

"I think," said Tubby as he leisurely began putting on a pair of black gloves, "Ace's feelings would be hurt very much if we settled for this amount."

"Oh, I didn't mean—" Herman began, then gasped with pain as Mr. Schwartz's right fist drove deep into his stomach. He started to slump forward but was straightened up by a left in his face.

Herman threw up his hands to protect himself, but his arms were seized by Mr. Barbour from behind, and Mr. Schwartz was free to rain blows upon his face and body. Finally the blows ceased to bring pain and Herman was aware of them only by the squishy sound they made upon his flesh.

Mr. Barbour dropped him at last and dimly Herman heard him say, "Have it by next Saturday or else."

For more than an hour Her-



man lay on the floor, his body and face a throbbing mass of pain. Finally strength returned to him, and he rose and went to the bathroom. He did not look at himself in the mirror but bathed his burning face with cold water. Then he got ice cubes from the refrigerator and held them against his face until it got numb and the pain had receded to a dull, throbbing ache. From time to time during the night he repeated his treatment, dozing in between.

In the morning Herman called Mr. Lodge, the owner of the Pinecrest Nursery, and reported that he had been in an accident and

would be unable to come to work for at least a week. Mr. Lodge was deeply sympathetic and told him to take off whatever time he needed. Herman was a hard worker.

Through the entire day Herman lay upon his bed, deep in thought. His mind functioned slowly, as did his emotional responses, but he was far from being stupid. His trouble was that events frequently occurred too suddenly for his mind to assimilate them and respond with the proper courses of action but, given time, he could arrive at a logical conclusion and work out a problem as well as anyone.

It was clear to him now that he had been drugged and cheated. Moreover, he had taken a savage beating. This was not the way of decent men. They were not entitled to the dignity of having a Mr. before their names. From now on he would think of them as Ace, Frenchie, and Tubby. Much more important, he did not owe a cent to Ace. Ace owed him something, as did Frenchie and Tubby.

Herman could exact payment in one of two ways. He could administer a thorough beating to each of the three. Possessing far more than average strength, there was no doubt in his mind as to his ability to do this, but he did not concern himself at the moment with plans for collecting his debt in this manner.

The second manner of payment was in cold, hard cash. Twenty dollars had been taken from his wallet at the Nightingale Club, and he was losing a week's wages. Also, he was entitled to compensation for his beating, and there probably were other things to collect for as well. The exact amount could be settled later. Herman's mind was completely practical. A cash payment was the only sensible thing.

How to collect his debt was the immediate problem. First, he must secure more information about

Ace and his men. Herman recalled a chat he'd had one evening with the apartment house manager, Mr. Higgins, and a certain Albie who did odd jobs for Mr. Higgins between long bouts of drunkenness. During the conversation some mention had been made of nightclubs and Mr. Higgins had said, "You worked at the Nightingale Club a while back, didn't you, Albie?" Albie had mumbled something and had immediately departed as though reluctant to talk about it.

Now, Herman decided Albie would be his first point of contact. Since Albie practically lived at the Golden Glow Tavern two blocks down the street, he would be easy to reach.

In the evening Herman dressed and painfully shaved. Although the swelling had gone down considerably, his face was still puffy and discolored. An application of tinted talcum powder improved his appearance somewhat. Besides, it was not at all uncommon for patrons of the Golden Glow to have battered faces. The evening was still early and the Golden Glow had only a few patrons when Herman got there, but Albie was one of them. He sat at the far end of the bar nursing an empty beer mug.

Herman made his way down to

Albie, who appeared only too happy to have someone next to him who might possibly buy him a drink. He accepted with alacrity Herman's suggestion that they go up to his apartment for a quiet visit and a few drinks. His eyes shone when Herman bought two bottles of whiskey.

A few minutes later the two sat at the kitchen table in Herman's apartment with the two bottles between them. Albie responded wholeheartedly to Herman's hospitality and began talking almost immediately. It was apparent that he was a lonely old man sadly in need of a sympathetic ear to listen to his woes. Without prompting, he got on the subject of Ace Powers. Ace, it seemed, was the most recent malignant force in his life. Albie dwelt at length on his vicious nature and his unspeakable practices.

Herman got far more information than he'd expected. He learned that Ace was the owner of a number of enterprises besides the Nightingale Club, including taverns, gambling houses, and places of even lower repute. He learned, too, that it was Frenchie's and Tubby's job every Saturday night to pick up the week's receipts from all these establishments and that they used Ace's big black sedan for this pur-

pose. It appeared that Ace trusted no one. Frenchie and Tubby were held jointly accountable for the weekly collection and therefore had to watch each other like hawks. They were on a rigid time table, and the manager of each establishment had strict orders to call Ace immediately in the event that the two collectors failed to show up within one minute after the scheduled collection time. Their last collection was made at the Black Panther Tavern and from there they returned at once to the Nightingale and turned a well-filled black bag over to Ace. They were then free to turn their attention to those unfortunates who owed gambling debts to Ace.

One thing more Herman learned that he felt could prove of value to him. For some reason, which Albie did not know, a certain Lieut. James Dillon of the police department had a bitter hatred for Ace and would go to any length to get something on him.

For a long time after Albie had left, Herman sat deep in thought evaluating the information Albie had given him. His mind worked slowly but with cool single-tracked purpose unhampered by any emotion.

Finally he got paper and pencil and began writing with painstaking

ing care. Step No. 1 he wrote and underlined it. Underneath, after more deliberation, he made a brief notation. Step No. II followed, with the notation underneath somewhat longer. Daylight had come by the time Herman had finished his paperwork. He yawned and stretched, and then went into more heavy thinking.

After a time he got up and went to the cabinet beneath the sink. After a little rummaging he located a piece of half-inch pipe about a foot long and a bar of lead solder. He tapped this with a hammer into a roughly cylindrical shape and drove several inches of it into one end of the pipe. He tested it for weight and balance, then wrapped adhesive tape around the handle end.

The next Saturday night, shortly before midnight, Herman stood in the darkly shadowed doorway of a secondhand store directly across from the Black Panther Tavern. Presently a large black sedan drew up in front of the tavern and Frenchie and Tubby got out. Tubby was carrying a black bag, and the two entered the dimly lighted place.

Herman assured himself that the street was deserted, then darted across and got into the back seat of the sedan. He lay down on the floor, hugging close against the

back of the front seat. Step No. I. Presently Frenchie and Tubby came out of the tavern, got into the car, and Frenchie put the car in motion.

Tubby yawned. "Well, let's get the take back to Ace. I suppose we've got to pay that stupid jerk Getzner, a visit. Think he'll have the money?"

Frenchie snorted. "Where would a dumb cluck like him get a thousand clams? Maybe I should work him over tonight."

"Go ahead," said Tubby indifferently. "It ain't easy on the knuckles. That square's head felt like solid bone."

Herman eased himself up cautiously, the piece of pipe in his hand. Tubby yawned again and gazed out the side window of the car. Herman brought the pipe down hard on the back of his head, and Tubby slumped against the door of the car. Step No. II.

Frenchie gave a gasp and his right hand darted to the inside of his jacket, but his hand froze as the end of Herman's piece of pipe pressed behind his right ear. Herman's gloved hand removed a snub-nosed .38 from Frenchie's shoulder holster and a similar weapon from Tubby's.

"You won't get away with this," Frenchie said, trying to turn his head around to see who was per-

petrating this outrage. Herman nudged him sharply in the neck with the piece of pipe. The guns he placed on the floor.

"Drive out to the Old Marsh Road," he ordered.

The Old Marsh Road was a stretch of highway leading out of town toward the south. It had fallen into disuse because of the construction of a newer highway, and now it was rare that a car was ever seen on it, particularly at night. Even lovers avoided it, mainly because of the unpleasant odors which came up from the marsh on either side.

Two miles out on the Old Marsh Road Herman ordered Frenchie to stop the car. He jerked Frenchie's head to the left and said, "Keep it that way."

Herman opened the car door and without ceremony dumped Tubby out on the soggy shoulder of the road. Then, opening the black bag which rested on the front seat, he thrust his hand in and found a roll of small coins. He broke this open and tossed the coins and wrapper close to the body of Tubby. Step No. III.

Two miles farther down the road Herman again ordered Frenchie to stop the car. "Pal, I've been doing some thinking," said Frenchie as he eased the car to a stop—but his thinking stopped

abruptly with a solid rap on the head from Herman's pipe. Herman dragged Frenchie's body to the side of the road but, before leaving it, he removed from a jacket pocket the ten I.O.U. slips he had signed. Step No. IV.

Herman sped back to town and parked Ace's sedan behind his own car which he had left on a dark side street only two blocks from the Black Panther Tavern. He deposited the contents of the black bag in his own battered suitcase, then drove off in his own car.

Herman made three short stops on the way back to his apartment. A half mile or so from the Black Panther he dropped the black bag into a trash container.

His second stop was at a phone booth. He dialed the Nightingale Club and when a hoarse voice responded, he said, "Get me Ace."

Ace responded instantly. "Frenchie? Something go wrong?"

"This ain't Frenchie. Frenchie and Tubby double-crossed you tonight. They won't be back with the take."

"You're crazy," Ace exploded. "They wouldn't dare. Why, I've got enough on those two jokers . . . Say, who is this?"

"They're way overdue, ain't they?"

"Car trouble maybe. Who are you?"

"No car trouble. They were arguing about the split outside the Black Panther. Maybe you'll find one of them along the Old Marsh Road. That's where they were heading."

"Now listen, you—"

Herman hung up. Step No. V.

Herman drove for a mile, then stopped at another phone booth. He dialed police headquarters and said to the police operator, "Lieut. Dillon. Important."

"Hold on a second. He went off duty about an hour ago, but he might still be around."

There was a mumble of voices, then a crisp voice said, "Lieutenant Dillon speaking."

"Got some dope on Frenchie Barbour and Tubby Schwartz, Lieutenant."

"Yes, yes . . . what is it? Who are you?" Dillon asked excitedly.

"They double-crossed Ace tonight, made off with the collection. Ace got wind of it and took off after them. They left town on the Old Marsh Road."

"Wait, wait!" Lieut. Dillon was shouting as Herman hooked the receiver. Step. No. VI.

Herman got back to his apartment without encountering anyone. He pushed the suitcase under his bed, undressed and turned in.

He slept soundly until 8:00 o'clock. Shaving was still a painful process, but he managed it while his coffee perked. He ate a hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast, then went out and bought a morning paper.

Huge headlines and a picture of Ace Powers covered half the front page: NIGHT CLUB OPERATOR CAUGHT IN MURDER ACT; D.A. DEMANDS DEATH PENALTY.

There was a great deal more but Herman went through it only sketchily. He was not a great reader even with time on his hands, and today he would be very busy. It appeared that Lieut. Dillon and his fellow officers had first come upon the bullet-riddled body of Tubby Schwartz, then farther down the road upon Ace Powers insanely beating Frenchie Powers with a pistol. Ace was screaming, "dirty double-crosser," over and over again as the police fell upon him. He refused to talk further. Frenchie Barbour died enroute to the hospital. Much was made of the mysterious phone call to the police, and of the disappearance of the collection money and the car which Frenchie and Tubby must have ridden in. Police felt strongly that a third individual was involved who made off with both but were at a loss to suspect who this

might be since Ace had enemies without number:

Herman tossed the paper aside. The affairs of Ace Powers no longer concerned him. Right now he was interested only in determining how much of the money in his suitcase was rightfully his. He was not going to be dishonest about it. He would take only what he had coming.

He got paper and pencil and sat down. First, there was the twenty dollars taken from his wallet at the Nightingale Club. The amount he was supposed to have lost to Ace puzzled him and he spent some time thinking it over. If the game had been on the level could he not have won a thousand dollars just as well as lost it? Why not let chance decide? He tossed a quarter into the air and called, "Heads." The coin came up heads and he jotted down 1,000 under the 20.

Now came the painful beating he had endured. He recalled hearing of a case recently where a woman had received as damages \$5,000 for a broken finger and \$5,000 for the mental anguish caused her by the awkward bandage her broken finger had required. Certainly his injuries were equal to a broken finger, and certainly, too, he would not have felt nearly so bad with a mere finger bandaged up; but he was determined to be

fair so he put down only \$10,000.

Tubby had called him a stupid jerk and Frenchie had called him a dumb cluck. These were clear cases of defamation of character, for he was neither. Herman knew that vast amounts had been awarded in court cases for such types of belittlement, but he meant to be fair even though it might cost him something. He would be reasonable, so he jotted down \$5,000 each for Frenchie and Tubby's name calling.

Herman was not sure what a collection agency would have charged him for collecting a debt of the proportion which Ace owed him, but he felt sure that \$2,000 would not be out of line. Since he had served as his own collection agency, he should certainly be entitled to this amount. He added it to his growing column of figures.

There was no question at all about his loss of salary, so he put down eighty dollars, but the time he had given to planning and executing this collection business called for some more thought. He estimated conservatively that he had devoted twenty-five hours of time to it. He did not feel that four dollars per hour was out of line, so he wrote down one hundred dollars.

Albie surely deserved something for the information he had un-

knowingly furnished him, and a bonus was not out of order when one considered the injustices he had suffered at the hands of Ace. Herman put down one thousand dollars for Albie. Some plan would have to be worked out whereby he would receive this in dribblets; otherwise he would game-ly try to drink up the one thousand dollars in one grand spree.

Albie's drinking reminded him of the seven dollars he had invested in the whiskey he had supplied Albie. This amount went in the column.

Herman thought hard for several minutes, and another claim came to him. Frenchie and Tubby had twice burst into his room uninvited. This was clearly invasion of his privacy. Say five hundred dollars per invasion. This made an-

other thousand for the damage list.

Try as he would, Herman found it impossible to come up with any more claims. Slowly and with the utmost care he added up his column of figures. It came to a total of \$25,207 including the \$1,000 for Albie. This, then, was the amount he had coming.

Herman got the suitcase from under his bed and carefully sorted the money. The various piles of bills and stacks of coins almost covered the kitchen table. He counted it carefully; then to make sure he had made no error, he counted it again. Next he worked a simple problem in subtraction.

Gazing at the answer he sighed deeply. He was going to have to lie in bed another day and think. Ace still owed him \$11.25—Step No. VII was yet to be completed.

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Dear Fans:

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, California 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

A mountain glimpsed in the distance is never as formidable as the proximate view.



I stood in the clearing with my own blood running into my shoe and looked at the crumpled and bloody tumble that was his body on the ground. My mind went all the way back to the Greek tragedies I'd read in college.

Just like the old Greeks knew, I realize that each of us makes his fate. The seed of our own death is in us from the first breath. We run

headlong to meet it, with no turning back.

Everyone in this deadly affair did only what he had to do. The preacher meant well and the gangster acted from love. Even Sidney was chasing a dream of sorts. We each moved according to our natures and ran headlong to our fates.

"Go call the cops," I said. "I

want to get it over and go home.”

It began when I was called and told to see Vincent Cobarelli, the man the Syndicate had called “King Cobra” for forty years and more. When he whistled, everybody jumped. I jumped too. I got up to his place as fast as I could.

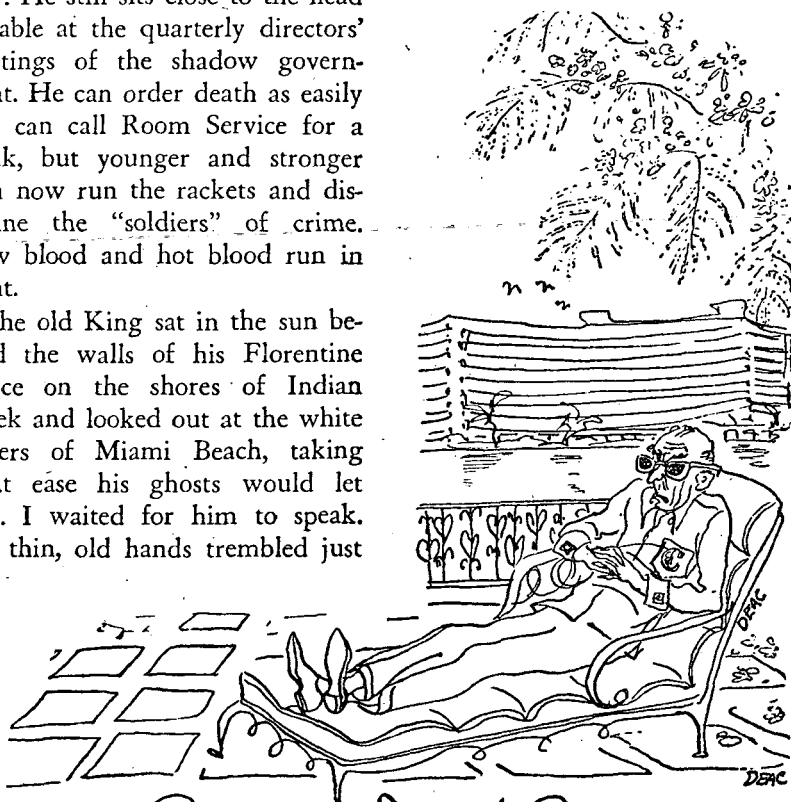
The King is an elder statesman now. He still sits close to the head of table at the quarterly directors’ meetings of the shadow government. He can order death as easily as I can call Room Service for a drink, but younger and stronger men now run the rackets and discipline the “soldiers” of crime. New blood and hot blood run in front.

The old King sat in the sun behind the walls of his Florentine palace on the shores of Indian Creek and looked out at the white towers of Miami Beach, taking what ease his ghosts would let him. I waited for him to speak. His thin, old hands trembled just

a little. The perennially blue chin was streaked with saliva from the corner of his mouth. He didn’t seem to care.

“The truth is, Mr. Hawk,” he said, “I need your special type of service. There is something you must do for me.”

I was openly astonished. “Why me?” I said. “Why send for me?”



By Edward Y. Breese

You know I'm not a part of your setup. I'm not even in the rackets. I should think you have plenty of people to do whatever you want."

"When I tell you, you'll see why. I cannot trust anyone close to me this time. The one to whom I spoke might be the very man who has done this to me. For me, suspicion is an occupational disease. I called you just because you *are* outside the rackets, Mr. Hawk."

"What is so important for you?" I asked. I'm Johnny Hawk, a wanderer and sojourner in this time. I'm for hire in a special way. I do the things that people can't or won't do for themselves. I draw the line only at dope and a few other things that wouldn't let me sleep. My rates are high, and I guarantee results as long as I live. The Cobra had sent for me to come and talk under the flame tree in his patio. The small scarlet blooms came down to make a quiet carpet on the stone under our feet.

"There's only one thing that is so important," he said. "Not money, Mr. Hawk, though you may not believe me; not even a threat to my own life. I am old as you see, and those things are not so important as they were. It is my flesh and blood, Mr. Hawk. My grandson, the little boy, has been taken. They, or someone, have him

for ransom. I want him. I must have him back, and I must have whoever took him."

His eyes hooded and blanked—I could almost have sworn with a nictitating lid. His voice was low and sibilant, no longer a quaver in it. "You will find the boy, Mr. Hawk. You will bring him to me alive. His father is dead, and I am old. My people I cannot trust. There is no one but you to do it. I know of you."

"Don't misunderstand me, Mr. Cobarelli," I said, "but why not try the F.B.I.? They're very good at kidnappings. If anyone can find the boy—"

He cut me off with a wave of the hand. "I cannot. I have sworn an oath on blood never to call the law. My life would be forfeit, and the boy's. If I could have called the law, I would not have sent for you."

"Okay," I said. "I felt I should suggest it."

"Forget it. You are all the law I can call on, Mr. Hawk. You do two things for me. First, you get the boy back, alive and well. That is the most important. Do anything you need to do. If you must pay, I will supply any amount if you are *sure* the boy will be turned over to you. If you have to kill anybody, I have influence. Don't misunderstand me; I have very

great influence. The law will not bother you. You are as free to kill as if you wore a badge. Maybe even freer."

"I understand," I said. "And the second thing, you want the man who did it."

"I want whoever did it. I want him and his to the third generation." He was savage in spite of his age and physical weakness. "He will see what it is to do this to the King. Spend what you need. Hire any help that you want. I will pay you a thousand dollars a day and all your expenses. Only you must get results."

"Agreed," I said. "Now, can you help me at all? Is there anyone you suspect?"

"You know better than that, Hawk. You know there is not anyone I don't suspect. That's what you're really asking, isn't it? Is there anyone I trust so much that you must not touch them? Or anyone I love so much? My wife perhaps?"

"That's right," I said. "That's just it. You have a new wife, a young wife. You have a bodyguard, servants, associates. What about them all?"

The saliva was starting to come out of the corner of his mouth again. He wiped it away with the sleeve of a hand-stitched silk shirt. "I would not be alive today if I

had ever in my life trusted anyone. My mother when I was very small, perhaps. Nobody else, ever. My wife is my wife, yes. She is young and loves life and money—my money. My bodyguard and my servants and my 'soldiers'—if they could not be tempted and bought, they would not be working for me. My associates hate and envy me as I do them. If the boy's own mother and my son still lived, I would not trust even them. There is no one, perhaps not even the little boy himself. But he is my blood, my only blood."

I looked at the blue waters of Indian Creek through the iron grill edging the seawall. I looked at the silk shirt and the four-carat diamond he wore. I looked at the castle at my back, filled with an emperor's ransom in rare and beautiful things.

"I don't envy you, Mr. Cobarelli," I said. It was a bold thing to say to his face.

He knew that well enough, but said, "Before you start, you will talk to my wife and to Sidney who guards me. They cannot tell you anything that I have not already told, but you must decide about them."

Just so casually he put the two who were close to him into my hands with power to judge and, if need be, execute. Indeed, I did not

envy the King Cobra coiled in the sun of Florida.

He had already told me the little he knew about the kidnapping. At two o'clock that same afternoon Sidney had driven up to the Day School on the Beach where Cobarelli's ten year old grandson had spent the morning. To his surprise the school secretary had run out to tell him that the boy was already gone. "His grandfather sent a cab for him. He said it was an emergency. I took the phone call myself. It *was* all right, wasn't it?"

It wasn't. The old man had never called. He'd have sent Sidney if there had been any emergency. Nobody had seen the boy since the cab had driven away.

When the King heard it he went into a shaking rage. He knew what was up, even if the snatcher had made no contact as yet. The first thing he'd done was get me on the phone at my hotel. There was a tone in his voice that had told me to hurry if I valued my own neck. So here I was.

A servant took me through halls and up a sweeping stairway to the second floor sitting room where Mrs. Cobarelli waited. She was even younger than I'd heard, not more than twenty-two or three. Her body was rounded, as plump with passion as a ripe peach with

juice. Magnificent, heavy dark hair was piled above a slender white neck. Her hands were ringed, and diamonds and emeralds cascaded from her neck to the low V of an expensive gown.

When I thought of her with the old man, I put her high on my suspect list.

She gave me a long, level look and held out her hand. When I took it, her grip was surprisingly strong. "My husband said you'd be coming up. He said I was to tell you anything I could—to answer any questions you might ask about anyone or anything. I'm terribly upset about this whole thing, you know. We . . . I . . . both of us really do love the boy."

I could see her eyes taking in everything about me. Already she probably knew within a couple of dollars what I'd paid for the suit and shirt I wore. I'd also have bet she had my chest and waist measurements within an inch. "There's not much I can ask this early in the game, Mrs. Cobarelli," I said. "Just one thing you might know about, though. How is it the boy would go off with a cab driver without any question?"

Her eyes widened when I asked. "A good point. By the way, call me Teresa. Most people do. No, I haven't thought of it before, but Peter should have held back or at

least asked more questions. He's old enough to know that he never goes anyplace that Sidney or I don't drive him. It's funny." She thought for a moment. "I can only suggest that he knew, or thought he knew, the cab driver. He's been told and told not to go anywhere with strangers. Like the rest of us, Johnny Hawk, he's had to learn suspicion very young."

That had been exactly my own thought. I'd wanted to see if she'd think of it, or say so if she did. "I'd like you to make me a list of all the servants and where each one has been all day, if you can," I said. "Also list the names of any relatives or friends of the servants who may have been visitors here at any time. Also list any truck drivers, delivery boys, that sort of people who make regular calls here at the house. I know you won't have their names, but I can get those where they work. I'll need the list by morning."

She laughed in my face. "Yes sir, Mr. Hawk. Anything else, sir? Fingerprints? Mug shots?"

I laughed with her. "I'm sorry, Teresa. When I'm working I get carried away."

"I'd like to bet you don't," she said. Her hand brushed mine with an electric heat. I know she noticed. "When this is over I'd like to see you carried away, Johnny

Hawk. And not a moment later."

I looked her in the eye. "When this is over. In the meantime I really do need that list."

"Okay. And I suppose you want to see Sidney now?"

I nodded, and she pushed a buzzer on the wall. Her finger jiggled in a code. Our eyes locked briefly while we waited.

Sidney was young, hard as flint, and darkly handsome. He wore expensive slacks, black and white shoes, and a lightweight vicuna sport jacket cut to hide the gun under his right armpit. I made a mental note to keep his left hand away from me, if we ever tangled. When he looked at Teresa his eyes caressed her.

I decided I wasn't going to like Sidney. Well then, the time to start was *now*. "Straighten out, punk," I said. "You were called to talk to me."

When I said "punk" it hit him hard, as I'd meant it to. He snarled and spun and reached for his gun all at one time. I'd wanted him to do just that. The spring in my specially designed Johnny Hawk Special sleeve holster shot the .44 derringer into my hand. I thumbed the hammer back and held the muzzle just ten inches from his navel. He froze with his hand still inches from his gun.

"When you're a boy," I said,



"don't ever try to take a man." He let his hand drop and I tucked the little gun away again.

His eyes were hot and blood-shot like a weasel's. He was just as vicious, and just as deadly. He looked from Teresa to me and back. She laughed low in her

throat and touched my shoulder with her hand. "That was lovely, Johnny Hawk," she said. "It wasn't just the word I would have chosen. To Sidney: "This man speaks for the King. Until all this is over you'll do exactly as he says. Do you understand?"

Sidney nodded. She went on. "I think if you're smart, Sidney, you won't argue with him after it's over either."

"Yes, Mrs. Cobarelli," he said. "Yes, Mr. Hawk?" I wondered what he would have called her if they'd been alone.

"I'm going out," I told him. "You stay here and watch the King till I get back. I'll keep in touch by phone. Whatever happens, you and he stay in the house. I'm going first to the school and then to the cab driver."

"I'm going with you," Teresa said unexpectedly. "Don't look shocked. I want to help and I can. It will only take a minute to change."

Actually it only took her six minutes. I thought it over and decided to let her come, at least as far as the school. She came back in a dark grey linen suit, beautifully tailored and expensive but not conspicuous, low-heeled white oxfords and a blue scarf over her magnificent hair. The jewelry was gone. It wasn't the same woman. This one was young and somehow competent looking; still beautiful but no longer flamboyant. I looked with frank admiration.

"I'm going to call the new you Terry," I said as we left the house. "It suits, I think."

"Okay," she said as she slid into

the seat of my older model car. "Just don't let it take your mind off business."

"Why did you come then?"

"Because I can help," she said seriously enough, "and because I wanted to talk out of range of the King's bugs and cameras. Every room in that house is rigged."

I whistled. "Every room?"

"Bedroom, kitchen and bath." She spoke quietly. "And in case you're wondering, yes, he knows perfectly well how Sidney feels about me. He also knows I've kept my bargain with him. I let him show me off all he likes, and I never, never, never do anything in public to shame him. I'm good to the little boy. In return I'm allowed a few fringe benefits. On occasion Sidney has been one of them."

"Is it worth it?" I said. "Not that it's any of my business, of course."

She looked me right in the face but I couldn't read those black eyes. "It really isn't," she said. "Still you never know, do you? Now for your first question—if I didn't think it was worth it, I wouldn't be here. I'm bought, Johnny Hawk, and the price was right. All the clothes and jewelry I can buy and enough in his Will to make me rich forever. My own lawyers have the Will. Most of it

goes to the boy, but there's plenty for me."

"You could want him dead," I said.

"Don't be a fool. A little time will take care of that. I'm young enough to wait."

For the time being I let it go at that. As we rode she ticked off the list of servants and delivery men for me, but there was nothing to give me a clue. The servants had all been in or around the rackets, and had been around for some time. Besides Sidney, who acted as a sort of major domo, there were three other guards. They were all former soldiers from the Cobra's own syndicate family. Now a little too old and slow for front line activities, they lived at the big house in case of trouble. Deliveries were routine and always made to the kitchen entrance.

"It could be any one of them, or none," I said finally.

"I think none," Terry said. "Except for Sidney, who probably hates even his own mother, they seem devoted to the King. He owns them, but he takes good care of his own property."

"He seems to think one of his partners might have done it."

"I'd say not a chance. They all hate and mistrust each other. They have to. But they won't start that

sort of thing among themselves. They don't dare. Once it began, there'd be no end to it. It would ruin the business for them all."

"I hadn't thought of that," I said. "Who do you think it might be, then?"

"Unless it's a nut or a complete amateur, there's only one real name on my list. That would be the boy's maternal grandfather. The Cobra's son never was in the rackets himself. His father wouldn't let him. He sent him to Harvard Law School instead, then bought him a desk in a New York corporation law firm. That's where he met his wife. She was a file clerk for the firm, just a country girl come to town. They got married because they were in love. It horrified both fathers. The King wanted his boy to marry into society. It broke his heart when he didn't. Give me a cigarette, Johnny."

I gave her one and waited while she lit it. "The girl's father took it even harder. He's a country preacher for a southern fundamentalist sect. When he found out who the King was, he went right through the roof. Cursed him by book and bell, I guess. Wouldn't even speak to his daughter again till the baby was born. Then he came to the house a couple of times and prayed over the crib. When

the parents both died in that car crash, the old preacher wrote the King it was a judgment of God for his sins and he'd better see the child was brought up a Christian. King got mad and barred him from the house. He wouldn't stand the thought of any interference with the little boy. For him, it was his son all over again."

"You've just given me a prime suspect," I said. "Why didn't the King tell me himself?"

"Partly because he's real touchy on the subject, I think," she told me. "He doesn't mind being hated but he hates to be despised. Besides, I don't think it would ever occur to him that a penniless old man would dare do such a thing."

"Where is grandpa now?"

"Right in town. He came down to be near the boy, has an old house up northwest. Still preaches some, I think. He's in the phone book."

"We're almost at the school," I said. "We'll check the old man later."

She was quiet for several blocks, then said, "Johnny, what makes you think *you* can handle this case?"

"I'll be honest with you, Terry. If it's a real pro job, I probably can't. That would take the F.B.I., and maybe even they couldn't, but

I don't think a pro mob would dare go up against King Cobra. It would be a declaration of war against the underworld as a whole. Every kingpin would help hunt them down as a warning to others. No, I think this is either personal revenge or some nut. In either case that means an amateur, and amateurs always make mistakes. They leave a trail."

Even in late afternoon the school office was staffed. Terry questioned the secretary while I listened. Yes, she'd taken the call herself. No, it didn't alarm her. She didn't recognize the voice. Accent? Well, maybe, like a southerner trying to talk like a northerner, or maybe a northerner trying to imitate Georgia talk. The message was simple enough. Sidney had had an accident with the car, and the boy was needed at home for a different emergency. A cab would call for him by name, take him out of class. That was all. The cab had come and the boy had gone without question. "No, Mrs. Cobarelli, he didn't seem upset or ask any questions. Just seemed glad to get out of school early."

"So much for all the times we warned him against strangers," Terry said a trifle bitterly. "We wasted our breaths."

She warned the school people to keep their mouths shut. Con-

sidering the effect of a kidnapping on their other wealthy clients, they were happy to promise.

I used a phone booth in the hall to call a friend of mine who worked as a starter for the cab company. He checked the records and came up right away with the name and address of the driver who had reported a call to the school. "That means the driver isn't part of the gang," I told Terry outside. "If he was, he wouldn't have listed the run."

"Not unless he was smart enough to want cover in case anyone here took his number," she reminded me. "Anyhow let's go see him."

We found the address easily enough, a third floor walk-up in a frowzy northside neighborhood. After I calmed the driver and his wife with a couple of double sawbucks and let them know which Mrs. Cobarelli this was, he talked freely enough.

"It was a perfectly straight call from the dispatcher," he said. "I was to ask for this kid at the school and take him to an address on the north side. I wasn't to ask him for money. Cobarelli has unlimited credit with us, including tips."

"What was the address?" I asked.

"It's in my book, but it won't

do you no good. The kid didn't go in. That's the only funny thing about the whole call. I wasn't supposed to see that, I think. I was to tell the kid his grandfather wanted him to come to this address, and drop him off there. When I got there it was just a house, not in Mr. Cobarelli's class at all, and it was all closed up like nobody lived there. I thought it was funny, but Cobarelli business is none of my business. I just followed orders."

"Sure. Get to the point."

"I'm doing it. I drove on down the street and made a U-turn in the middle of the next block to go back to my stand in town. It ain't strictly legal, but we all do it. That's when I saw the kid was still on the sidewalk. He was talking to a man. The house was on a corner, and I watched them go around the corner together. When my cab got back to the cross street they were gone. There was an old blue sedan moving down the block. I think probably they were in it. That's all I know."

"It better not be," I said. "You're talking about King Cobra's grandson. You know what the King will do if he thinks you held out anything."

"Honest, mister. That's all I know."

"What about the man you saw?"

How well can you describe him?"

"Look, I was a block and a half away. I couldn't see him real well, and I didn't know I was supposed to. He was just a man, maybe a tall man. I'm not sure."

"You can do better than that," I said. "Cabbies are better than cops any day for noticing things." I put a hundred dollar bill on the kitchen table between us.

"We-ell," he stammered, "maybe there was one thing. When he walked his pants legs were kinda short. Even at that distance I could see he was wearing white cotton socks. You don't see them very often any more. Anyway, I'm pretty sure that's what he had on."

That was the best he could do for us. I used his phone to call the dispatcher who had given out the call, but he was no help. He thought a man had called in, but that was all. No, he hadn't noticed any accent.

While I was on the phone Terry looked up a number in the book and wrote it down on a pad from her bag. I didn't question her about it till we got outside again.

"It's grandpa's phone and home address," she said. "Who else but an old country boy wears white cotton socks these days? With them on his feet he has to be right from Squaresville, and our best bet there is the preacher. This is be-

ginning to look easy, Johnny Hawk."

"It's beginning to look a lot too easy for my taste," I said. "People just don't get breaks like this. Or do they?" They don't.

The address we were looking for was way west and north of the downtown area, in a section still only partly developed. The houses were small and old, mostly they were frame. The yards were big, and there were old orange and grapefruit trees, mangos and ancient avocados that had been planted a long time ago. There was even the reek of an occasional fall of rotting guava fruit.

Grandpa's house stood in the middle of at least three lots, all hedged with a tangle of croton, hibiscus, flowering bougainvillea, and just plain trash bushes. It was still light when we drove up. In front was a big, cast-concrete hand, taller than a man, on a square base. The first finger pointed straight up to the sky. On each flat of the base a phrase was painted in Gothic capitals: "God is Great;" "God is Goodness;" "He is Coming;" "Repent Ye Sinner." Beside the pillar was the rusted wreck of a power lawn mower.

We got out of the car and started up the path to the sprawling frame dwelling. As we got to the steps a character in overalls

stepped around the corner of the house. He had an old twelve gauge shotgun shoved out ahead of him at waist level, and I decided to let my gun alone. "Stop right where you are, cousin," he said. Then, raising his voice a notch, "Come on out, preacher. The folks you were looking for have done come."

The door opened, and an old man came out onto the small porch. He had on a rusty black suit, a black string tie, and white cotton work socks showing above black shoes that had been slit to ease the bunions. He wasn't carrying a Bible, but he had the look of a man who might at any time. His face was long and high-cheek-boned and gentle, on the whole a good face and an intelligent one. Even his creed had somehow failed to stamp it with the mark of fanaticism. "Good evening, Mrs. Cobarelli," he said softly enough. "I thought that if anyone was smart enough to come here it would be you. I must say, though, that I didn't expect you so soon."

"Thank you, Preacher McGilivray," Terry said, managing to capitalize the title. "This is Mr. Hawk. He works for my husband and me."

"You want I should shoot them, preacher?" asked shotgun.

"Goodness no, Roy. At least not

unless Mr. Hawk tries to pull a gun."

"Let him try." The way Roy looked I wasn't about to try right then.

"He won't try," Terry said. "Can't we talk about this, sir?"

"Indeed yes, little lady. Of course. Both of you come in and join us for some apple pie and coffee and home-made ice cream."

I didn't believe till I saw it, but the boy was there all right, at a kitchen table with a blue-checked cloth. A motherly looking housekeeper was stuffing him with pie and ice cream. He barely stopped eating long enough to greet his step-grandmother. My own grandmother never made better apple pie. I covered a big wedge with ice cream and ate it while they talked.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Cobarelli," the old man said. "I just wanted to have the boy for a few days and see how he is. It's been nigh on three years now. I wrote your husband about it more than once, but he never even answered. Sometimes I'd wait around the house till the boy was driven to school, then follow, just to see him. That's how I knew where it was. I got this idea from a book I read, but I didn't expect you folks along so soon."

"You're lucky we were the ones

who found you," she said. "If it had been Sidney, he'd have come with armed men and somebody would be dead by now."

"I guess I was a mite foolish. Yes, that Sidney is a mean and violent man. You're right not to trust him, Mrs. Cobarelli. I've seen him look at your husband's back. He hates him."

This interested me enough to stop eating. "Why do you say Sidney hates him?"

Terry answered. "He wants things my husband has. (She meant herself, I think.) Most of all he hates being just a body-guard. Sidney is very ambitious. He wants to be a Captain of the Syndicate in his own right—wants the money and power and women—most of all, the power. That big house is sometimes a prison for Sidney. He doesn't quite dare leave while the King lives, and waiting makes him bitter."

Little Peter had gone out to see Roy, or we couldn't have talked so freely. We heard him laugh in the yard. It was almost full dark now. "Now that you know, can't you just let him stay a few days?" his grandfather asked. "You know Mrs. Robinson and I would take good care of him. Couldn't you make your husband see that? I'd purely appreciate it if you could."

"I like you, Mr. McGillivray,"

Terry said. "We're not alike, but I like you. Yes, I'll see what I can do about it, but don't get your hopes too high. My husband is old, and a violent and unreasonable man, and he's had a bad scare. First, I'll call him and let him know the boy's all right."

"Use my phone." I was almost surprised he had one.

Terry dialed the number and asked for the King. Then, instead of talking, she just listened and said "Yes" once or twice, gripping the phone so hard her knuckles showed white under the olive tan. We both knew something was wrong.

She hung up. "I didn't tell him," she said. "I thought I'd better not. Johnny, he's gotten a ransom note. Somebody wants half a million in cash."

The fact of it grew like a seed until it filled that shabby little parlor, wall to wall. We sat for a long moment trying to evaluate what it meant.

"It wasn't I. I give you my word." The preacher was earnest.

"We believe you," Terry said. "Johnny, we've got to go. He wants us right away. The drop is set for later tonight."

"Okay," I told her. Then I turned to the old man. "Whoever is doing this can't know where the boy is—I hope. We can't take him

now. If you know any more like Roy, you tell them to get their guns. Let nobody in but the King or one of us. Nobody."

The preacher was beginning to get the point. "No harm will come to the boy here," he said with the dour strength of one of Cromwell's troopers. "I am not a man of violence, but I can promise you that."

Back in the car, heading for the Beach, Terry put it into words. "You know who it has to be, don't you, Johnny?"

I nodded. "It has to be Sidney. Nobody outside the house even knows the boy's gone except those people at the school, and they're not the sort to pull this. Of course it might be Roy, or someone of the preacher's friends, but I don't really think so. It's not in character there, either. We'll know when we get the full story."

"He told me the note was typed."

"Roy can't type—a thousand to one. He'd print or cut words out of the paper."

She went on. "A taxi brought it. The King talked to the driver. A woman had given him ten dollars to deliver the envelope. She told the cabby a strange man had given *her* another ten to do it. A blind trail there. The note says to bring \$500,000 in cash to a certain ad-

dress at midnight tonight, and to come alone."

"What made him think the note was authentic?"

"There was one of the boy's monogrammed handkerchiefs with it. Johnny, it wasn't the one Peter had with him. I saw him use that as a napkin when he finished his pie. It's a habit of his that I haven't been able to break."

"Then everything says this is an inside job. That means you or Sidney or one of the servants. I don't think it was you."

She reached over and touched my hand. "You *know* it wasn't me. But how does Sidney think he can ever get away with it? He knows you and the King and I would figure it in time. He *must* know. And he knows the King would hunt him down wherever he went. So why? Why?"

"Don't you know, Terry?" I asked. "The half million is just a bonus for Sidney. What he really wants is the King. The old man is just crazy enough about the boy to take the money to him alone. If he does, he'll never come back. As soon as the boy was missed, Sidney must have seen this as his golden chance. This is the one-in-a-million shot to get everything he wants. He can kill the King and get his freedom and a big stake all at once. He has a scapegoat, he

thinks, in the real kidnapper. Besides, with the King dead I'm off the job, and you have a fortune to take your mind off revenge. Why, this afternoon Sidney must have thought he was the luckiest man alive. All he had to do was slip out long enough to send that note."

"What if the King's too smart to go alone?" she said. "What if he takes you or Sidney with him?"

"Sidney would love to go. If I go too, or instead of him, he'd figure an extra killing won't hurt him."

"What do you do, Johnny? Do we tell the King, and take Sidney when we get to the house?"

"We'll see. I think not. The only way we'll know for sure is to take him in the act. Your husband might not believe us anyway. He doesn't trust you or me any more than Sidney. You can never really tell what a mind like his will decide to do."

At the big house we found the decision had already been taken out of our hands. Sidney was gone. The old man had sent him on ahead to stake out the drop point, watch for danger, and/or tail whoever picked up the money.

"I know this may be some sort of trap," Cobarelli said. "For the boy's sake I have to go, anyway. I have to and I want to. I want

the people who are doing this. I figure Sidney can help. Now that you're back, Mr. Hawk, you will go with me. Sidney left before Teresa phoned. He won't expect you, but I will feel safer. Did it ever occur to you, Mr. Hawk, that Sidney could be part of this?"

"The thought did cross my mind," I said. The King was old, but not stupid.

"We'll soon know," he said.

The drop point was well chosen. He was to drive north on U.S. 1 to a certain gas station about a mile short of the county line. Just past the station a sand and shell road runs east toward the upper bay through a tangle of heavy brush. About five hundred yards down the road he'd find an old, deserted house standing back in a clearing. He was to take the money in a bag and put it down just outside the front door. Then he was to turn the car around and drive halfway back to the highway and park with his lights off. When the money had been picked up and counted, the boy would be sent down the road to him. In case of any slip the boy would be shot.

Like most of his kind, Cobarelli kept a fortune in his house—just in case. Just in case of anything, I guess. He produced a suitcase full of hundreds and fifties. He

was too old to drive fast, so we had to leave early. I told him just what I wanted him to do.

It was a long, uncomfortable ride. I was curled up on a rug in the trunk of the big, black sedan. The top was rigged so it didn't quite close. I could raise it and slip out easily enough. I'd been told not to make any move that might endanger the boy, to act only if something went wrong. By that the King meant if he was attacked. I had my own plans. I'd gone over and over the idea of telling the King the boy was safe, but had decided against it. As things stood, he was doing exactly what I wanted. If I told him, he might change his plans. He wouldn't let Terry go along.

I knew he was in some danger this way but, to be honest, I didn't really care. Nobody loves a Cobarelli. I'd do my best to protect him, but if I failed I'd not weep; that is, if I was still alive myself. There was always a chance I'd underestimated Sidney. I didn't admit it to myself, but I guess the truth is that by then I was working for Terry and the boy more than for the King.

At last we turned off the highway just past the gas station, closed at this hour. The house in the clearing was to the right of the road. Cobarelli followed directions

in the note and left the car lights on low beam so he could be watched from the house. He followed my directions and aimed the car right at the house. I was out of the trunk with gun in hand before he got the car door open.

I stayed flat on the ground in the shadow of the car. My .44 magnum was held out in front of me and braced with both hands. There were two closed windows in the front of the one-story frame house. The door stood open all the way. The low beams fell just short of the house, so the door was just a black hole. I figured that's where he would be. Behind the car lights, I was hidden from him.

Old Cobarelli started for the house, half carrying the bag of money and half dragging it. I didn't dare let him get too close to that door. I figured Sidney would shoot him with a pistol when he got close enough. I was wrong. I was almost *dead* wrong.

I figured just where I thought Sidney had to be inside the hall to make his kill and squeezed off a shot of my own through the open doorway. If he'd been there, I'd have had him.

All hell broke loose. He was in the house okay, but not back of the doorway. It was the window to my left, the one partly masked from my fire by the bulk of the

car, and he had a submachine gun instead of a pistol. That's the sort of mistake I don't want to make twice.

His gun squirted slugs through the window glass. The first burst cut Cobarelli almost in half. The second sprayed the front of the car, smashing both headlights, and probed for me on the ground. I was already rolling wide for my life but, even so, one slug tore my left thigh. It missed the bone by luck. I managed to hang onto the magnum. With the lights suddenly gone, I couldn't see to shoot.

I knew what came next, but it didn't do me any good. He came around the corner of the house from the rear, bent over, running hard and zig-zagging as he came. In the dark he was only a shadow against shadow. When he got close

enough for me to see I knew he'd open up with the squirt gun; not a happy thought. I'd try to get him, too.

Suddenly, car headlights flooded the clearing. Neither of us had heard it coming, and the headlights were off till it cleared the brush.

The light was at my back and in his face. I fired first. A .44 magnum will crack the engine block of a car through the hood. The one shot literally exploded Sidney's heart.

Then Terry was out of the little sports car and running across the clearing. "Oh, Johnny, I had to follow. I heard the shots."

"All over now," I said. I had a thought. She ran to me, not to Cobarelli. The King is dead. Long live Johnny Hawk.

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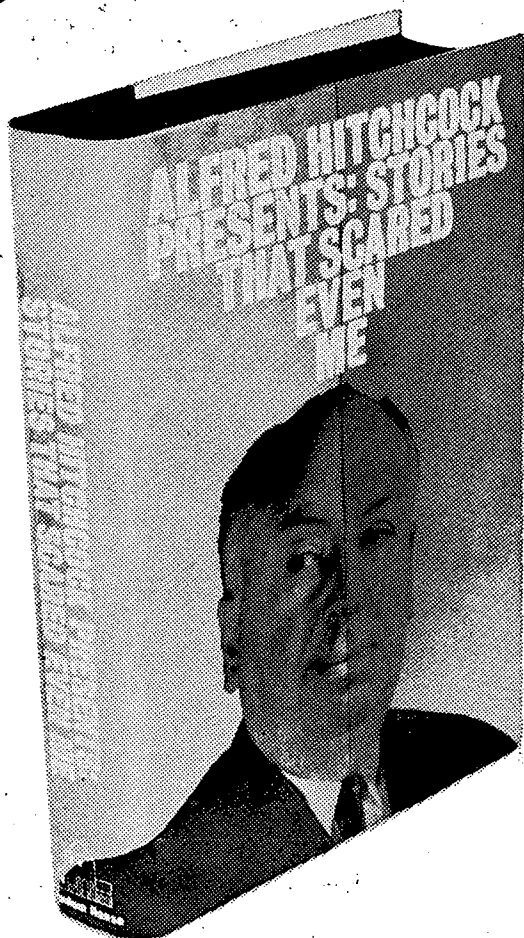
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